WORLD POKER TOUR™

A TEXAS HOLD'EM MYSTERY

the PICASSO FLOP

vince van patten

AND ROBERT J. RANDISI

$24.99
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FROM VINCE VAN PATTEN, HOST OF THE *WORLD POKER TOUR*, AND MYSTERY WRITER ROBERT J. RANDISI COMES A NOVEL OF CHILLING MURDER AND RIVETING POKER SUSPENSE...

the PICASSO FLOP

Just out of prison after ten years, professional poker player Jimmy Spain visits his wealthy former cell mate and listens to an offer he can't refuse. The rich man wants the ex-con to mentor his only child in the game of poker. In return, he'll set Jimmy up and pay all of his buy-ins on the poker tour. This deal looks like easy money, especially after Jimmy meets the kid—a cocky and abrasive young girl named Kat who has some good, yet raw, poker skills.

Soon Jimmy and Kat enter a World Poker Tour tournament at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. Things are coming up aces... until a player is found brutally slain with a Picasso flop—three picture cards—on his body.

When suspicion points to Kat as the killer, it's up to Jimmy to find the real culprit—while fighting to remain in the tournament. As one ghastly murder after another knocks out other players, this hard-bitten veteran of the felt knows that in this cutthroat world of card sharks, someone could eliminate him—or Kat—for good. On the clock, with the blinds escalating, and down to his last hand, Jimmy fears he may be drawing dead...

Featuring the appearances of such poker luminaries as Mike Sexton, Doyle Brunson, and James Woods, and co-written by a true impresario of the game, THE PICASSO FLOP mixes money, mystery, and the adrenaline-pumping excitement of Texas hold'em poker action, Vegas-style. Shuffle up and read.

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the PICASSO FLOP

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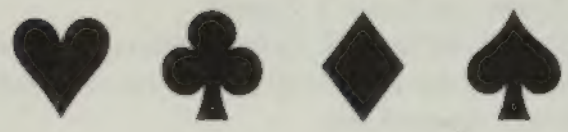

VINCE VAN PATTEN

AND ROBERT J. RANDISI

NEW YORK BOSTON

Most of the events and main characters in this book are fictitious. Certain real locations and public figures are mentioned. Five actual poker personalities are participating as characters in this book: James Woods, Michael Sexton, Antonio Esfandiari, Michael Mizrachi, and Gus Hansen.

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To my father, who taught me how to play poker well at age nine and also taught me how to play at life

—VVP

To Marthayn, who pointed to the TV while we were watching the WPT and asked, "What about him?"

—RJR

Gambler: An unusual way this word is often used is to describe the class (that is, the quality) of a poker player. When the word is used this way it describes the highest class of player.

—Doyle Brunson's Super System

ONE

In a city planted smack-dab in the middle of a desert, "waste" is unacceptable. Some say the Bellagio's dancing fountain is a waste of water—certainly the most valuable commodity in a desert community.

Gamblers believe that tourists who come to Vegas to see Hoover Dam or Wayne Newton or casinos more theme park than anything else, and who don't gamble are a total waste.

Those same coupon-clutching, gimmick-drink-carrying tourists think people who gamble are wasting their money.

Jimmy Spain, however, knows the true meaning of the word "waste": ten years spent behind bars, barbed-wire-covered walls crawling with guards . . . now that's waste. . . .

Tonight the poker room at the Bellagio is at its flashiest and most boisterous. It's the eve of a major poker event, the World Poker Tour's Five Diamond World Classic. Anyone and everyone who's anything in poker is in this large, bright room. There's at least thirty tables spread out and being played to full capacity. The clattering of chips, huge piles of cash out on the tables are staggering.

Adjacent to this circus-type arena is the tournament section.

This section is dark and empty, much like a stadium the night before a World Series or Super Bowl game. But within a matter of hours the room will be filled with the sound of chips on chips, voices over voices, rising and falling. Players and railbirds—onlookers who watch the games with rapt attention, who regard the players with the awe usually reserved for movie stars—add to the commotion.

But for now the action is reserved for a special area in the middle of the poker room.

This roped-off, three-walled centerpiece is the high-stakes area known as Bobby's Room. The glamorous room consists of six or seven large photos of poker greats eyeballing the table from above. Doyle Brunson, Chip Reese, Jennifer Harman, Gus Hansen, Dallas Jack Rafferty, among others. The luminaries of the fastest-growing game on the planet. This is where they all played. Named after Bobby Baldwin, also known as "the Owl," in his poker days, Bobby was an old-school poker legend who gave up the flick of the cards when Steve Wynn, owner of the Bellagio, took him on. He was so impressed with Bobby's shrewdness that he made him his right-hand man, chief operating director of the entire place. Bobby never looked back.

The game was going strong with some of the superstars playing for fortunes, but off to the side, a mere fifteen feet away, another game for high stakes was getting some attention.

Yes, there was a pecking order at tables in the Bellagio poker room. They stacked the bigger games around Bobby's Room, kept the riffraff playing for five- and ten-dollar limits from getting too close. But now the looky lous were paying more attention to one particular table. The reason was it was shorthanded, very talky, and cash was flying around with reckless abandon.

Five of the six players were professionals, some of the most

colorful and fanatical on the circuit. The other was a movie star. That got people's attention.

Side games—also called money games—are nontournament games played for cash. Players compete for different reasons. Some play to stay sharp or to get into shape; others play to whittle away the time between tournament games. And still others make more money in these games than they make at tournaments. There are players who thrive during tournament play but can't stand up to the pressure of a money game, and, by the same token, there are deadly money players who fold like a three-legged bar stool at tournaments.

The players at this table don't care what the format is. They play with the same skill no matter what the game or stakes. Tonight they're all playing for money and bragging rights in a no-limit game where thousands are won or lost.

Around the table-service trays are remnants of hastily consumed meals: stained, dirty plates; coffee cups and glasses; serving dishes coated with congealed grease, half-eaten rolls, cold French fries, and partially consumed burgers and sandwiches. The food eaten during a poker game has to be simple, one-handed meals that leave the other hand free to hold cards and chips. Bottles of water and beer or half-filled glasses stand in holders, the green felt tabletop reserved for the accoutrements of the game.

Neatness doesn't count here where there are no TV cameras. Here, there is only the game at its purest.

To say Caveman Hal Florak was the largest man in the room was never an understatement. It was true on this night, in a room of three hundred people, and it would still be true in the morning, when eight hundred people sat down to play in the World Poker Tour event. The big man couldn't help but attract attention, first for his size and then for his playing ability. And no one had ever

accused Caveman of being a clotheshorse. He favored jeans and belts with large buckles that remained hidden because his shirttails always hung out, hiding them. He won with grace but was a notoriously bad loser. He hated when someone knocked him out of a tournament and then wanted to shake his hand. He preferred to stalk off somewhere to lick his wounds, drown his sorrows, or simply mentally replay questionable hands. If anything, his moods in money games were even worse.

Caveman's least-favorite hold 'em hand to start with was sixes wired. Over the years, more often than not, he had ended up eating that pair of sixes. A two-time winner on the WPT circuit and holder of one World Series bracelet, he had learned long ago to resist the lure of that opening pair, and he mucked them.

"The way you tossed those cards away," James Woods, movie star/poker expert, seated next to him said, "they must've been sixes."

"Fuck you, movie star," Caveman replied with good humor.

This is what the railbirds wanted to see: wisecracking actor James Woods trash-talking the very ominous Caveman. No one went there except Woods, whose genius IQ had propelled him to one of the world's best in a very short time.

He was also the spokesperson for HollywoodPoker.com, a huge online poker site whose gimmick was that you could play online poker with celebrities. Woods was a staple in this poker world.

Woods was passionate about his game—ruthless about picking on people, always tearing opponents down in a hilarious way, at the same time picking up tells. Woods had the railbirds behind him chuckling.

"You're easier to read than a fucking stop sign, you big, overgrown trash can."

Caveman just shook his head, not knowing if he should applaud the actor or kill him.

"Woods is here. Am I the greatest? Now you're steaming, Caveman. You could boil a pot of coffee on your head right now!" Woods laughed, looked down at his cards. Ace, queen of hearts. Pretty solid starting hand. "I call, you degenerate." He splashed in about a thousand dollars worth of chips.

Next was Scooter Thompson, an average-looking white guy of about forty who was slightly overweight. He wore one of those Gilligan hats, dressed like he just walked off a public tennis court—khakis, ragged white polo shirt with a hole under one arm—making him seem normal enough, about the most normal-looking man at the table. But what gave away his complete insanity was the full-sized dummy, dressed exactly like him, sitting on his lap. That's right, one of those Jerry Mahoney deals. And the most peculiar thing was that Scooter wasn't even a ventriloquist. Oh yeah, he tried but he was god-awful. Scooter and his partner, Skippy, were notorious freaks on the poker circuit. Scooter was never known to be without Skippy.

Players and fans cut him some slack because Scooter Thompson was one of the most successful poker professionals to have come along in the last decade—a great side game player and consistent tournament winner. He looked down at his cards, peeking at a pair of nines.

"What do you think, Skippy?"

Skippy came to life and in an eerie, raspy voice replied, "I don't know, Gilligan, you're stuck a lot right now. Maybe these fools are bluffing."

Scooter retorted, "Don't call them fools. That's insulting. Let's play our hand."

Woods couldn't take it anymore. "Look, Punch and Judy, quit the freak show. You've had enough time, Jerry Mahoney!"

Skippy the dummy spoke up. "Don't rush us, Mr. Hollywood. We got a decision to make."

"We? What is this *we* shit? It should be one player to a hand. That's the rule!" Woods said.

Woods was starting to get antsy, but the onlookers were loving it, breaking out in laughter.

Scooter finally pounded in a thousand dollars, and once again in that eerie voice the dummy said, "We're gonna call, Mr. Hollywood. How about that?"

Woods said, "Good, another weak call. I got you beat, pecker head."

The dummy's head moved abruptly, as if deeply insulted by the remark.

Tabbelousithana Thandy, also known as Tabby, smiled winningly as he held his large glass of white wine elegantly in the air. That full glass of intoxicant seemed larger than his actual head, which was about the size of a grapefruit. Tabby was an effete-looking metrosexual Thai man of about thirty who, at five foot two, had a perpetual smile, rosy cheeks, a nonstop cackle, and was never without his huge glass of Pinot. Win or lose, Tabby was a good sport and an excellent poker player but also one of the best all-around hustlers in the poker world. Even after horrible defeats Tabby was known to utter his very famous line, in his high-pitched, Thai accented voice: "Don't worry, life short, have good time."

It was easy for him to say. He was always smashed.

This time Tabby looked excited as he pumped up the pot with a pair of ladies.

"No, no, no . . . make three thousand dollah to go!" Tabby took another hit from his glass and cackled loudly.

Next came the only woman at the table. Except for the influx of Internet players, who had been earning their way into major tournaments for a few years now by winning online tournaments, the presence of Sabine Chevalier made this side game a microcosm of what would be going on tomorrow during the tournament. As would be the case tomorrow, but on a much larger scale, these were the best players in the world going up against one another for all the marbles on the table. For the most part, the dead money players—the first timers in any tournament—were usually gone by the time the final table had sorted itself out.

Sabine looked across the table at the dark-clad man who had begun the betting. She didn't know him from Adam. Barely thirty, she was the youngest player at the table. She had grown up in France, and she was considered by many to be one of the finest women players in the world, often mentioned in the same sentence as Cloney Gowan, Jennifer Harman, and Evelyn Ng. Her style at the table was very French. She wore gloves; her dress was both sophisticated and sexy. Despite the fact that she was a French beauty, everyone there respected her play. She honored them, as well as the pros they were, but this man unnerved her. Jimmy Spain had walked in, shaken hands with everyone as he was introduced, and when he came to her she thought he had the saddest eyes she'd ever seen—sadder than any man she'd ever sat across the table from. And yet, despite the eyes, his manner was light, his banter quick, and his charm powerful. But those eyes were watching her now, waiting for her to make her play, and she could read nothing in them. She looked away, down at

her chips, not because she thought his hand had her beat but simply because of those eyes.

"I fold," she said and was annoyed that her voice came out in a barely audible whisper.

Now all eyes fell on Jimmy Spain, who, if he was not a total unknown, was close. He had been away from the game for twelve years, and during that time it had changed dramatically. Texas hold 'em had gone through the roof in popularity ever since Steve Lipscomb had the dream of taking poker to the masses, creating the ultimate poker show, the *World Poker Tour* on the Travel Channel. Largely because of him the game had exploded, and now copycat shows all over the world could be seen on TV at any time of night or day.

But while the circumstances surrounding the game had changed, one thing remained the same—the cards. During the course of his hard life, the cards were the only things that never lied to him. Jacks and kings were his friends, the queens his lovers; they all took care of him. If they ever turned on him, it was never deliberate or with malice, and they usually found a way to make amends later.

He looked at his cards now, studied the ones on the table and then the faces around him. He took everything into account and then said good-naturedly, "You people are just forcing me to go all in." Making his play, he pushed his remaining chips—some nine thousand dollars' worth—toward the center of the table. It was the first time all night he'd been dealt a pair of aces, and after winning several hands already with lesser ammunition, he had decided to trust them.

Woods and Skipper mucked their hands, and when another ace fell on the flop to give Jimmy a set, it busted Tabby out of the game and sent him off to bed. As the Thai man got up he was

still cackling, swigging from his wineglass, and saying, "Don't worry, life short, have good time."

The big game started in the morning; they were all going to need to be well rested.

That left five players to fight it out—Caveman, Woods, Scooter and the dummy, Sabine Chevalier, and Jimmy Spain.

Among the group watching the final five was the very dapper Mike Sexton, a true Southern gentleman, probably the greatest ambassador of the game. A long-time champion player in tournament and side games, he had stepped behind the microphone several years ago to start commentating games for the World Poker Tour. When he first spotted Jimmy Spain that morning he'd been stunned. He'd heard two things about Spain: one, that he'd gone to prison, and two, that he was dead. He had played in many money games against Spain during the late eighties and early nineties, before the man disappeared. He knew Spain to be a solid and deceptive player. But the man he'd seen earlier in the day was different. Sure, he was older, in his early forties now, had put on some weight. But it was the lines on his face and the look in his eyes that made Sexton sit up and take notice. This was a harder Spain than he'd ever known, and suddenly he knew the first story he'd heard was the true one. Jimmy Spain had been inside, and the reason made a chill run up and down Sexton's spine. Spain had probably just recently gotten out. Sexton felt sure of that.

Tabby went up to Sexton as he was leaving. His cheeks seemed to grow even redder whenever he went broke.

"Oh, well, I bust. He play well! Who is dat guy?"

He was referring to Spain. Sexton seemed nervous, talking to Tabby out of the corner of his mouth in his slight Southern drawl.

"Jimmy Spain," he said. "You're a little too young to remember him. He was pretty regular in money games in the Midwest and the South about . . . oh, fifteen, twenty years ago. He was a kid then, not much younger than you are now, but he was good."

"What happened to him?"

"I heard he killed a man, got sent up for it." Sexton moved closer to Tabby, whispering, "Rumor has it, it was murder."

Sexton and Tabby both swallowed hard. Tabby then gulped down the remainder of his wine.

"Murder? Glad I didn't suck out on him on that last hand."

"You're tellin' me," Sexton said. "But, yeah, looks like he's back—and from the way he's playin' tonight, maybe in a big way."

Tabby looked disturbed and shook his head. He slunk away without his usual cackle.

"I see you, Mike. . . . Gotta get some sleep for tomorrow. Have good time."

As the young man walked away, Mike Sexton figured Jimmy Spain had one man beat already. If he and Tabby ended up at the same table, Tabby might be completely psyched out. Right away Sexton decided to stop helping Spain. He was not going to pass the man's story around anymore. He shouldn't have told it to Tabby anyway. Whether or not Jimmy Spain was an ex-con and murderer was his business and nobody else's. Spain did look like he was going to be a force to be reckoned with when the big game started.

Sexton was glad he was commentating the tournament and not competing. "What a country," he said under his breath. Gambling with murderers.

TWO

The last hand of the night came down to Caveman, Scooter and his dummy, and Jimmy Spain. Woods had already folded. Sabine had gone broke only the hand before but was sticking around.

Spain noticed that she seemed to have developed a real interest either in him or his play. She was obviously scoping him out—he just didn't know if her interest was personal or professional.

Caveman liked his aces and bet them.

"Two thousand." With fingers like sausages he moved chips to the center of the table.

"Well," Woods said from his seat, "no sixes there."

There was some laughter, but it died down quickly as the action continued.

Spain watched as Caveman eyed Scooter and Skippy, waiting for them to make their decision. Spain knew from all the table talk that night that although the two weren't friends they knew how the other played. Spain thought they were paying too much attention to each other and not enough to him. That was his advantage.

Mike Sexton still hovered around as did a solid crowd. Jimmy Spain was content. He played old-school American style, which was solid and tricky, mixing it up between power poker and a little trash-talking. Nothing wrong with trying to psyche out your opponents a bit.

Spain watched as Scooter and his disturbing dummy stared at Caveman. Spain figured the big man for something strong. Caveman usually didn't come out raising with anything less than tens. Now Scooter looked over at Spain and tried to read him. But Spain was tougher to read than a Chinese menu.

Scooter Thompson employed a freaky-deaky style of playing. He let his little friend Skippy do the talking, hoping to distract his opponents by drawing them into his circus.

"What's it gonna be, Zip and Pip?" Woods asked, deciding to give the guy a shove. "We've all seen enough of this dumb and dumber act."

Scooter looked at Spain, then at Caveman's hairy face, his beard lying on his chest. Spain had known men inside who let their beards get that way, but while those had been virtual rat's nests, Caveman kept his remarkably clean. And because he wore his sleeves rolled up Spain could see that his hairy arms were clean as well. Oddly, even at a time when some of the other people in the room might be getting a bit rank, the big man wasn't. Despite his great bulk, he didn't seem to sweat.

"The movie star's right, Scooter," Caveman said. "You've been stalling all night. You creeps gonna bet?"

The onlookers laughed. Jimmy Spain sat back to observe his opponents objectively as they did the same.

Scooter and Skippy peeked at their cards—a three and a four, both spades. He liked to play these kinds of hands once in a while because they were complete deception hands. Mix-up plays. If you hit your hand, you could break a player. No one could put you on that kind of hand. And it was costly if you didn't hit. But this time Heckle and Jeckle had a feeling and decided to gamble. Besides, Caveman was right. It was getting late. There was no point in burning the candle at both ends the night before the

big game. Hell, they were up money and were going to splash around and make this call.

"Okay, we call," Scooter said.

Now it was Spain's turn. He didn't keep them waiting. He had a pair of deuces, very marginal at best, but this was turning out to be a sideshow where drinking and boasting had become the norm. It had been a weird night at the table. Everyone was gambling, he was up also, so Spain decided to go with the flow.

"I call," he said.

Now it was time for the flop.

The three cards on the table came up historic—ace, deuce, five, unsuited, but that didn't matter to Scooter. He'd flopped the cinch straight.

Caveman had made a set of aces, and Spain a set of deuces. Everyone had improved, to say the least.

Caveman had raised before with his aces, and he went for it. "All in." He pushed the remainder of his chips to the center. About twenty-two thousand.

Scooter didn't hesitate. He said, "I call" without even consulting Skippy and advanced his chips toward the center of the table. He had the Caveman covered with only a couple of thousand left. They'd sort out later if Spain should call.

Spain, with his low three of a kind, had a feeling he was beat, but there was a reason why he was going to make this call, and it wasn't just because he had been running extremely lucky all evening. It was because this game was good exposure. The big names in poker were watching this hand. Even if his hand didn't hold up, it would establish him as an action player. A gambling kind of guy. Good advertisement in the long run.

"Well, in the interest of getting us all some rest, I call," he said.

"I think we all have about the same amount of chips." That was correct. The dealer sorted out the difference, which was very minimal.

The players turned their hands up. Everyone leaned forward to read the cards, and there was a collective gasp. This was a classic battle of hand over hand over hand. Straight over set over set, this didn't happen very often. A murmur moved throughout the crowd.

"Freak show flopped the cinch straight," Woods announced.

Then Sexton added, "Yeah, and Caveman's holding the big set over Spain's little set. Unbelievable."

Fourth Street came next. It was a six, which gave Scooter an even higher straight. Caveman and Spain had not improved on their sets.

"Yer killin' me," Caveman said. "How can you fuckin' call me with three four?"

Spain had only one out. He needed the fourth deuce to win. Caveman, on the other hand, had seven outs. He could draw the fourth ace or pair the board with the fives or sixes for a full house. Spain could also make a full house, but Caveman's would be higher. Scooter the puppeteer was absolutely still, and Skippy the puppet was as dead as a block of wood.

The river card came up. Everyone in the room leaned forward as the dealer burned a card and flipped the last card of the night.

From the stunned silence came the eerie voice of Skippy the dummy, "Deuce!" And the crowd erupted.

That hand broke up the game. James Woods looked on in disbelief, shaking his head. Jimmy Spain was the big winner of the night. It was a surprise to most of the people in the room but not to him.

The players shook hands all around and wished one another

luck for the tournament, which would be starting at noon the next day. The exception was Caveman. He'd stood up as the deuce—Spain's only out card—had been turned over. True to form, he stalked away into the bowels of the Bellagio, cursing loudly on his way out, the others in the room parting to let him by.

Spain caught Sabine Chevalier staring at him, but when she saw that he noticed, she turned away and headed out with some of the other men. Tonight would not be the night he found out what or where her interest really was.

Mike Sexton came over to shake Spain's hand. "Nice job. I had a feeling you were going to do it." Sexton had the knack of always saying the right thing at the right time.

"I got lucky," Spain said. "It's rare when you outdraw those kinds of players."

"These guys?" Sexton said. "Wait until you get goin' tomorrow—you'll be playing with all the big names. And I'll bet a few of them will be surprised to see you back in action. You know both Doyle Brunson and Dallas Jack are here?"

"Been a lot of years since I last saw those guys." Spain shook his head as he realized just how many. "Jesus, I was practically a kid."

They walked to the elevator. While winning had not been a surprise to Spain, it was a relief. His intention had been to get his feet wet after so many years away, but this was a solid score. It would help him pay off some of his old debts, which he was sure he'd run into eventually.

On the way up in the elevator, there was an awkward silence. Mike Sexton seemed a bit nervous.

Spain asked, "You playin' tomorrow, Mike?"

"No, they don't let me play. Ah'm ridin' the mike, coverin' the

tournament for the World Poker Tour." The Southern accent was heavier some times than others.

"You get to play much at all anymore?"

"Sometimes," Sexton said. "Not on the WPT circuit, because ah work for the company, but ah play in a few other major events and side games like this from time to time. Things have really changed, Jimmy. There's jus' too many players in the game. Because of the Internet there's too damn many amateurs. Jesus, dead money players are winning all the time. There's a lot of luck involved." "Dead money" meant amateur players. "It's jus' not the same world."

Sexton kind of stopped in his tracks. The dead-money line coming out of his mouth reminded him that the man with him had killed someone, if the rumors were true.

"I'll find that out for myself," Spain said. "Well, guess I'll turn in."

"Good luck tomorrow," Sexton said.

"Thanks."

Spain stepped out. The doors started to close, but Sexton stopped them and called Spain's name.

"Yeah, Mike?"

"Ah heard—well, ah mean—some stories . . . you know . . . about why you were away."

"Yeah?"

"Well . . . I just wondered, is all." Sexton couldn't spit it out.

Spain turned to face him squarely. "Is this for TV?"

"Aw, no," Sexton said. "No, Jimmy, this is just . . . well . . . mah own curiosity."

"I was inside, Mike," Spain said. "Is that what you heard?"

"Uh, well, yeah . . ." Sexton tried to get the words out to ask if it was murder but couldn't.

Spain shrugged and said, "It's true. Maybe another time I'll tell you the whole story. Okay?"

"Sure, Jimmy, sure," Sexton said. He released the elevator doors. "Good night."

But it wasn't really okay. Sexton was upset with himself that he hadn't been more forward. He really wanted to know the details but decided his gut was correct.

"Damn, just shared an elevator with a murderer."

Jimmy Spain walked down the hall to his room. When he got inside he opened the safe in the closet and put his winnings away. In the morning, he'd take it downstairs and put it in one of the hotel's safety deposit boxes reserved for high rollers.

With the funds safely tucked away, he took a quick shower, grabbed a beer from the honor bar, and then used the remote to turn on the TV. He immediately muted it. All he wanted was the movement, not the sound. He left it tuned to the casino channel, where lessons on how to play the table games ran on a loop.

He felt calm inside, at peace, but knew he'd be nervous the next morning. Standing at the window, he pulled aside the heavy drapes and looked out at Vegas. His room overlooked the fountain with the dancing waters. Across the street he could see Harrah's, the Imperial Palace, a small casino called O'Shea's, and the Paris; but the casino that caught his eye was the Flamingo, representing Bugsy Siegel's dream in the desert. Bright orange neon that could be seen for miles. Not one of the fanciest joints on the strip, but it had the most history. The Dunes, the Sands, they were gone, but the Flamingo went on.

Jimmy figured it had been fourteen or fifteen years since he'd

last seen Vegas. The changes didn't thrill him, but he did appreciate what had remained the same—the lights, marquees announcing spectacular acts—he liked that Tom Jones was still there and Wayne Newton—the food, the waitresses and showgirls. He also liked feeling that same old thrill in the pit of his stomach; he could still feel the pulse of the place.

In that six-by-nine cell, he'd become so aware of his own pulse beating in his ears that night after night he'd expected to have a heart attack. Usually, by around 2 A.M., whenever the yelling or crying or screaming died down, there it was.

The quiet.

And his heart beating, pounding.

He'd been out two years but still hated the quiet that came only in the middle of the night. With his eyes closed, he could've still been in his cell.

He turned away from the window, leaving the heavy drapes open. Most people wouldn't have been able to sleep, but he wanted the neon to keep him company. He wanted it to remind him of where he was—but mostly, he needed it to remind him where he wasn't.

THREE

When Jimmy Spain came out of the elevator the next morning, he paused to drink in the chaos. It was fairly early—9 A.M.—but time had no meaning in Las Vegas. The place was as busy now as it would be at 8 P.M.

He stood in the midst of the lights, the noise, the smells, the grandeur that was the Bellagio. A waitress walked by carrying a tray of drinks, and he had to admire the way her uniform hugged every curve of her full breasts and butt, making her charms very evident to everyone. Even though he'd been out of the joint for two years now, beautiful women still made his breath catch. He appreciated them a helluva lot more than he had before. He watched her until she was out of sight.

He turned his head when he heard a slot machine making fake coin noises. During his stretch the casinos had gone to the TITO system—ticket in, ticket out. He missed the days when the real coins clattered out, making a racket falling into the trays. Aside from the slots, though, word on the street was that Vegas was starting to realize its mistake. Roller coasters and other rides, family package deals—the huge resorts were bringing people in all right, but those people weren't plunking their money down. The gamblers still came and played, but they were pissed off about all the families passing through the casinos on the playing floor—fathers and mothers pushing strollers, gawking, getting

in the way, and then moving on. The casino owners were pissed about it, too, and apparently were making moves to change it all back before it was too late.

That was fine with Jimmy Spain. Change it all back, he thought. Put it back the way it used to be—and while they were at it, maybe somebody could give him back the nine years and eleven months—call it an even ten years—he'd spent in the penitentiary in Marion.

Shaking his head to dispel the fantasy and bring himself back to reality, he checked his watch. He was supposed to meet the kid in the coffee shop for breakfast at nine. He was going to be a few minutes late.

♦

Kat Landrigan had been in Las Vegas barely twelve hours and already she'd been carded four times. Each time, though, she happily showed her driver's license, which revealed her to be twenty-two. She had, in fact, turned twenty-two only the week before. And she was happy because, not only was she in Vegas for the first time in her life but she was there to play in the WPT Five Diamond tournament. Nothing could dim her spirits, not even being asked constantly to prove she was old enough to gamble.

The other thing that made Kat Landrigan smile was that she had laid down the cash to play. She wasn't one of those Internet yuppies who had paid forty dollars to enter an online tournament and beaten a bunch of other computer geeks to get in. There were only two ways to earn your spot here: win a satellite tournament or pay the buy in and entry fee.

Of course, the fifteen-grand entry fee had come from an inheritance from her mother, not from the guilt money her old

man sent each month. She'd banked his money, only used it for emergencies. Her plan was to win enough on the circuit to pay it back and more—toss it right into his face. Dear old dad had earned that by being a monumental asshole.

While she waited for her breakfast companion to arrive, she stared at the casino floor, at the people, the lights, and knew she was gawking. She'd started at the airport when she'd had to walk past rows of slot machines to get to the luggage area, continued when she'd first entered the front doors of the Bellagio, and went right on doing it now. Previously, she had played in some of the poker rooms in California, and she'd been to some smaller casinos, but this . . . this was gambling Mecca! Las Vegas! The Bellagio! This was where the big boys played, and she was there to play with them.

She caught sight of Jimmy Spain walking across the casino floor toward the restaurant and resisted the urge to wave. She didn't want to look uncool, like a starstruck geek in front of Jimmy, because she owed all this to Spain's tutelage. Having Jimmy Spain move into the same condo building a year ago had been the best thing that had happened to her in her whole life. The older man had taken a liking to her and she'd welcomed the friendship—especially when she'd learned Jimmy Spain was a professional poker player. At the time she'd felt that what he could teach her was worth hanging out with the old dude, but then something unexpected happened. Turned out she liked the guy. And best of all, there wasn't anything sexual about their relationship. Jimmy was almost like a big brother to her. He was pretty good-looking for an older guy, and at first she'd even wondered why he hadn't made a pass at her, but it all worked out better than she could have hoped.

Kat wasn't sure why Jimmy had wanted them to arrive sepa-

rately, but it was no skin off her nose to give in to her tutor's wishes. Apparently Jimmy felt it was okay for them to have breakfast together—probably because other competitors socialized, which Kat only noticed when Jimmy reached her table.

"God, do you know who that is?" she asked as he sat across from her.

"Do I know who who is?"

"There," Kat said, trying not to point, "right there, the table by the door."

Spain turned, saw two young men eating breakfast together. "Are you gonna tell me who they are, or do I have to guess?"

"That's Daniel Negreanu and Gus Hansen. Are those aces wired, or what?"

"That's very exciting, but would you quit with the poker talk. It's very annoying."

Jimmy stared at Kat. She had a habit of peppering every conversation with poker terms, and he'd been trying for months to break her of it.

She was talking about two of the young poker stars who had made names for themselves while he was inside. The kid knew them because she watched the WPT tour on the Travel Channel with religious fervor. He knew them because she had raved about them—and other star players—ad nauseam. With her it was always Sammy Farha did this or Johnny Chan did that.

Spain studied his young protégé. Kat was dressed in T-shirt and jeans, what she had referred to as the "Evelyn Ng" look—except that she didn't have the contours to fill the garments out the way Evelyn Ng did. She looked like a skinny sixteen-year-old, and almost appeared benign. On the other hand, she had a cockiness about her that Spain felt was a bonus. Her brashness

was going to rub people the wrong way, which was good. She pointed out that it had never hurt Phil Hellmuth.

"Besides," she'd said, "that's the name of the game these days."

And then there were the piercings, the black nail polish, and the purple-tinted hair. Originally, he'd wanted her to get rid of them, but then he changed his mind. If they're looking at all that stuff, they wouldn't be watching her eyes or her face, and they definitely wouldn't be taking her seriously, which was fine in poker. She could sneak up on them. Distract them with her weirdness. It would work in her favor if players thought she was flaky.

"Kid, try to control yourself," Spain said now. "You don't want to look like a tourist."

"Right, right . . . but Jesus, dude, Gus Hansen! He's the absolute nuts!"

"Please, the poker terms! Order your breakfast," he said as a waitress came over.

But he knew how Kat felt. He'd awakened that morning with the drapes wide open, had gone to the window, and relished the view in the daylight. He remembered nights in his cell when he wondered if he'd ever see the outside again, let alone Las Vegas. He'd arrived in prison as a Fish, a first timer, but had quickly learned the ropes. He was not a violent man by nature, preferring to use his quick tongue to talk his way out of trouble, but he did know how to take care of himself. He'd managed to avoid becoming somebody's punch board by a combination of guile, a couple of well-chosen fights to make his point, and his god-given ability to play poker. He'd lost the fights but gained respect for having picked them. And not only organizing poker games but

teaching inmates how to play had made him valuable—too valuable to damage or kill.

As the years went by he was able to pass on some of his knowledge—his survival techniques—to other carefully chosen newcomers. If he thought somebody could be of use to him, he took him under his wing. It had worked out well over the years.

Like father, like daughter, only if Kat ever found that out, the jig would be up.

"Steak and eggs," Kat said to the beautiful young waitress.

"The same," Spain told her.

"Comin' up." She gave Jimmy a dazzling smile before flouncing off to fill their orders.

"This town is full of poker stars, kid," Spain said, "but you've got to keep your mind on your business and your eye on the prize—and stop looking over there at those two guys."

"Chill out, dude," Kat said. "I just can't believe I'm here, you know? This is way cool!"

"I know."

"I can't thank you enough for this, Jimmy," Kat went on seriously. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Don't worry about it." The girl's sincere gratitude made him feel like crap.

Spain wasn't sure how to relate to the young woman. He'd never had a sister or a daughter. The only other significant relationship he'd ever had was with his father, who'd wanted him to follow his lead and be a Philly cop. When he went his own way as a professional gambler, his father had not taken it well. In fact, he'd disowned him. It had been years since they'd spoken. He'd never even told the old man about being in prison. That would have just about killed him.

But over the course of the year he'd taken a genuine liking to

Kat, even though he'd practically been forced into meeting the kid and contriving to become her friend. If Kat ever found out the truth, Spain knew the kid would hate him. Oddly, that worried him—and it had to do with more than just money. Despite the difference in their ages—not only coming from different generations but different cultures, for chrissake—he liked Kat. If he had to find a word to describe where their relationship had found its way to—in spite of the subterfuge upon which it was based—it would have to be friends.

"I owe you big, Jimmy," she went on, "but you gotta know that if we end up at the final table together, I'm gonna take you down. You'll go home broke."

"Sure, kid," he said. "I know."

FOUR

The Five Diamond was not actually Jimmy Spain's first tournament since leaving prison, nor was it Kat's.

At the beginning of the year Kat started bugging Jimmy about playing in an actual tournament. There were all kinds of different events at local card rooms in California. Big and small. To groom her properly he had her enter numerous tournaments in the upcoming months. Most of them were small, one-hundred- to two-hundred-dollar buy ins, but she gained invaluable experience. Overall, she and Jimmy made a little money, Jimmy making a few final tables. But they were studious. They would analyze into the wee hours different hands they had each played and how they could have otherwise played them. She was getting good, especially because she had a coach like Jimmy. Jimmy also advised her to make a log of all the big-name players she'd be going up against in the bigger events. This was essential, to know your competition, to have it down on paper, like a bible.

The next stop for both of them was the WPT event at the Bellagio. It would be a five-day event. It would take stamina, great play, and a lot of luck to be a winner.

She was ready.

Killing time was never a problem in a Las Vegas casino. After breakfast they walked through the Bellagio, passed the crowded penny and nickel slot area, and stopped briefly at the poker room. The side games were still going strong. They had everything there, ranging from two- and four-dollar games packed with tourists back up to Bobby's Room, the millionaire's game, which was empty now. Legends didn't play before a major event.

Spain recognized the player who was coming toward him with a confused but happy look.

"Man, I thought you were dead," the man said in a cowboy drawl.

"Not quite," Jimmy said, shaking his hand.

"You playin' today?" Jimmy said he was. "Well, good luck."

As the man walked away Kat asked, "Do you know who that was?"

"Yeah, T. J. Cloutier."

"You knew that was T. J. Cloutier?" Kat said. "How could you just shake hands with him like that, dude?"

"I played against him in the old days once or twice," Spain explained. "He's very good."

Kat stared at Spain as if seeing him for the first time.

"Very good? He's one of the best. And you know him? Dude!" The "dude" thing was starting to get to him. He winced.

"I've been around, kid," Spain pointed out, "just not recently."

They had never discussed what Spain had done for the ten years before they'd met. All Kat knew was that Jimmy Spain had been away from the game for a while and was now coming back. But having a past champion like T. J. Cloutier treat Spain with obvious respect raised the kid's eyebrows.

"You know, before poker was plastered on every TV, if you played the game they looked at you like you were crazy. You didn't brag about this, Kat. Poker was survival then, not glamorous."

"Okay, dude, chill. I think they're startin'."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "I'm coming."

They reported to the poker room, checked in, got table and seat assignments, then milled about with the other players until it was time to be seated at one of the poker room's thirty-nine tables. The place was a madhouse of players itching to get started. Several players his age and older approached Spain, shook his hand, and asked where he'd been. One man who he recognized and remembered quite well was considered the godfather of poker, Doyle Brunson. In his seventies now, Brunson had won the World Series of Poker in 1976 and 1977. He was one of the true legends of the game, still playing competitive poker after almost fifty years and just recently taking a WPT title. While in prison, most of Spain's reading material had been poker books with *Doyle Brunson's Super System*, first published in 1978, leading the way. It had long been considered the bible of the game. He'd also read books by pros like David Sklansky, Phil Hellmuth, and his old friend Mike Sexton. He'd done all that to keep his edge, to keep himself informed of developments in the game and the poker universe.

Kat continued to be in awe every time someone came to shake Jimmy's hand and talk to him, but she also fought to keep her cockiness.

"Good luck, kid," Spain said when it was time to be seated.

"Because of you I don't need luck, Jimmy," she said brazenly. "I'm good enough to win this, and that's no bluff. Just watch out for me at the final table."

"Let's get through day one before we start thinking about the final table, Kat."

"You worry about your cards, I'll play mine. How about that check and raise?"

"Kat, cool it, the poker shit. It's embarrassing."

Kat winced, realizing she was getting carried away again. With a slight nod she went off into the crowd to find her table. Jimmy shook his head. He hoped she wouldn't find any top pros there. Maybe she would get a soft table, lots of amateurs and maybe some online dead money who she could run over. Top pros might put too much pressure on her in her first big-time start.

Spain was the first to seat himself at his table. He hoped this wouldn't make him look overanxious—but he was. The other players approached by ones and twos, introduced themselves to him and, where necessary, to each other. By the time they were all seated—including the dealer—he realized he was playing against a table that had only two top pros: Erik Seidel, who he didn't know, and Chris Ferguson, who he knew slightly. Ferguson was easy to remember, as he went by the nickname "Jesus." With his long hair and beard he did look eerily like the popular image of Jesus Christ wearing a black cowboy hat. Ferguson also had a trick he did. He could propel a card across the room with a flick of his wrist and impale it on a piece of fruit—usually a banana—as if it had razor blades for edges. Most players had tricks they could do with chips, but this trick was something else that made Ferguson memorable.

The poker circuit and the lives of these high-stakes gamblers weren't just about the game. It was also about the action. And the action could be anything from what nationality the next person coming out of the elevator would be to crazier things like who

could do a standing backflip on a poker table. There were also other sick bets such as weight bets—poker players frequently bet one another who was going to lose more weight in a thirty-day period. These bets were not small potatoes either; they were for hefty chunks of change, usually starting at ten thousand dollars and sometimes going into the hundreds of thousands. One of the most peculiar bets was when the famous Gus Hansen actually challenged his sidekick friend, who was broke at the time, to wear breast implants for a whole year for a fifty-thousand-dollar payoff. The friend took him up on it and the she-man embarrassingly played side games for the entire year. Poker players are just like that. Most of them are high-action guys who have to be betting on everything and anything. That was the life—that's what they loved and knew.

Jimmy looked out across the sea of poker players, trying to locate Kat, wondering who she was playing with, but it was impossible to find her. He did, however, see other faces he recognized, like the legendary Amarillo Slim Preston, Tom McEvoy, Men Nguyen—known as "Men the Master"—and Johnny Chan. They were all stacking their chips the way they liked them.

For the most part, the faces surrounding him belonged to strangers. He hadn't been among so many since the first day he walked into prison. Suddenly he realized he was sweating. Was he nervous about playing or having another anxiety attack? The damned things came out of nowhere since he got out. Sometimes he wondered if being out was a dream. Would he wake up and find himself still in his cell?

He sat back and willed himself to relax. Being nervous enough to puke about playing in this tournament would have been ac-

ceptable to him. After all, he was only human. But not an anxiety attack—not now!

"Are you all right?" the player next to him asked.

He turned his head and looked into the eyes of a young, pretty blond woman who couldn't have been much older than Kat.

"I'm fine," he said. "Thanks for asking . . ."

"Holly," she said.

"I'm Jimmy."

They shook hands, and he noticed her palms were damp.

"First tournament?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"How did you get here?"

"I won an office tournament. The prize was the entry fee and buy in for this." She leaned toward him so that their shoulders touched and said very softly, "I'm so nervous."

"Just relax. Pretend you're still playing at your office."

"That's hard to do," she said forcefully. "That's Chris Ferguson sitting across from us. My God, he's like a star!"

"Yes, he is."

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asked, leaning toward him and lowering her voice again.

"Sure, why not?"

"I have a room in this hotel for one night," she said. "If I make it through the day I'm gonna panic because I've got no place to stay after tonight."

He smiled at her. "Seems to me that's a problem everyone here would like to have."

"Have you played in tournaments before?"

"Yes," he said, "quite a few over the years."

"Oh," she said, puzzled. "It's just that I thought you were sweating. . . ."

"I'm a little claustrophobic," he lied, "but I'm all right now."

And he was. Talking with a pretty woman, calming her down, seemed to have had the same effect on him. The sweats had stopped, the dizziness had passed.

He was ready to play.

FIVE

One year earlier . . .

Jimmy Spain paid the cabdriver, then turned and walked up the winding driveway to the house, his single suitcase in hand. He'd last seen Harold P. Landrigan as the man left Marion penitentiary. Spain figured the day Landrigan walked out the doors he forgot about him—or, at least, pushed him to the back of his mind. He figured once Harold was out among his banking and Wall Street cronies he'd forget all about what had happened inside. He hadn't left prison rehabilitated; he'd left because his lawyers and money—lots of money—had finally reversed the pull of the strings.

Now here Jimmy was, sprung five years earlier than he was supposed to be, sure he knew who to thank for that.

He'd called Harold when he knew he was getting out. The man didn't have time to talk to him that day but said, "Come straight to my house in Brentwood."

Brentwood, Jimmy had thought as he hung up. California. How was he supposed to get from Illinois to California? But Harold had thought of that, too. The guard who handed Jimmy the cash and train ticket was either honest or well bought. Landrigan had even remembered that Jimmy hated to fly. He wasn't

afraid; it was just a pain in the ass—and no doubt more so since 9/11.

Jimmy's eyes felt gritty because the only sleep he'd gotten had been on a train. He still smelled like prison as he set the suitcase down and rang the doorbell, fully expecting a tuxedo-wearing butler to answer it and send him to the back door. Instead, there stood Harold Landrigan himself. He'd put back on the weight he'd lost in prison, plus some. Also, he'd kept the do he'd adopted in prison when he could no longer get the blow-dried look. It was a little longer, but then he wasn't the blow-dried banker who had first entered the prison system.

"Jimmy! Goddamnit!" He grabbed Jimmy in a bear hug, pulled him to his barrel chest, and pounded on his back. When he released him, he immediately grabbed Jimmy's suitcase. "Come on in! Goddamnit, it's good to see you!"

He kept up that kind of chatter as he led the way through an expensively tiled entryway, down a hall to a plushly furnished, bookcase-lined office. The house was huge, and Jimmy hated to admit he was a bit dazed. Oh, he knew Harold P. Landrigan was supposed to be wealthy, but to actually see it. Damn!

"Doesn't look like being inside hurt you any, Harold."

The one concession Jimmy had made to the man in prison was his request never to be called "Harry." Why not? It was an easy request to honor, and Jimmy certainly wasn't looking to piss Landrigan off, just keep him alive to be of use later.

This was later.

"No, no," Landrigan said, putting the suitcase down behind a chair. "In fact, it's helped me. You'd be surprised at how many of my colleagues are impressed that I did time."

"I'll bet."

"Have a seat. You want a drink?"

Jimmy lowered himself onto the cushy chair and said, "Bourbon, if you got it. It's been a long time."

"Jack Daniels," he said. "I remember."

He went to a side bar filled with bottles and poured them both some Jack. He served Jimmy's on the rocks. He did remember. Jimmy shuddered as Landrigan added some water to his. He would've put Landrigan back inside for watering down good bourbon if he didn't owe him.

"Thanks," he said.

Landrigan took his and instead of sitting behind his desk sat in a chair facing Jimmy. Jimmy appreciated that. Putting the desk between them would have been like putting him in his place.

The room—all reds (the upholstery and curtains), golds (the rug), and cherrywood (desk and paneling)—was in stark contrast to prison gray. Jimmy had the feeling this might have been Harold's intention, to set this room up so that it'd be completely different from the walls he'd had to stare at for two years. After ten years it was sure as hell easy on Jimmy's eyes.

"What are your plans?" Landrigan asked.

Jimmy let the bourbon sit on his tongue for a moment, savoring it, before swallowing so he could speak. "Well, I damn well hadn't been planning on coming to California. But now that I'm here . . . I don't know. I was thinking of hitting you up for a wad of start-up cash, but I can't do that now."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Harold," Jimmy said. "I'm out five years ahead of time. I know who did that. It must have cost you plenty."

He waved his hand. "I have plenty," he said, "so don't sweat that, Jimmy."

"Naw, Harold," Jimmy said. "A plane ticket, some cash—" he touched his pocket, where the cash he'd already been given resided, "—and a glass of good bourbon, that's all I expect to get out of you now. We're square."

"We're not even close to square, Jimmy," Landrigan said. "Not by a long shot."

"As far as I'm concerned we are."

Jimmy finished the bourbon, put the glass down, and stood up.

"Stay, Jimmy," Harold said, also standing. "Have a meal, a shower . . . stay overnight and listen to what I've got to say."

"About what?"

"I want you to work for me."

Jimmy laughed. "Yeah, right. Vice president of the bank? Stockbroker? I know, debt management. I think my qualifications are kinda lacking."

"But you are qualified for one particular thing, aren't you?"

Jimmy stared at him.

"Poker?" he said, as if reminding Jimmy.

"I know that, Harold, but how does that help you?"

"Like I said," he answered, "stay, eat, and listen."

Jimmy hesitated.

"I'll give you five grand," he added. "No strings attached."

"Five grand? To stay, have a shower, a meal . . . and listen? That's all?"

"I hope it's not all," he said, "but, yeah, that's what five thousand will buy me. Whaddaya say?"

Jimmy might have said no but he caught a whiff of himself at that very moment.

"Okay, sure," he agreed with a shrug. "Why not? I've got nothin' to lose, right?"

"Great," Landrigan said. "I'll tell Cook to set another place for dinner, and then I'll show you to your room."

Cook, Jimmy thought, as Landrigan rushed out. Aside from the house and money, that was the first sign he'd seen that prison had not squeezed all the affectation out of Harold P. Landrigan.

SIX

After the best meal he'd had in ten years—possibly the best meal he'd ever had—Harold took Jimmy to another room. More-muted colors here, no reds and golds but soft browns. There was a time in his life when this would have felt comfortable, but after the last ten years Jimmy felt out of place.

"My study," Harold Landrigan said. "There's also a library in the house. Too many damn rooms."

Jimmy knew Harold's wife had died while he was in prison. He also knew there was a child, but Jimmy hadn't seen anyone during dinner except Harold.

"Cigar?" Landrigan asked.

"No, thanks."

"That's right," he said. "You didn't smoke inside."

Cigarettes were currency in the joint. You used them to buy what you wanted or needed. Jimmy had also used them to play poker with, until the other inmates had gotten smart and stopped playing with him. Smoking them would have been like burning money on the outside.

"More bourbon?"

"That I'll take."

Jimmy felt good. He was showered, shaved, fed, and rested—he'd had an hour nap before dinner—and he was wearing clothes Landrigan had supplied. He didn't know if they'd been bought

specifically for him, but they were his size and what he would have worn—solids, dark.

His host handed Jimmy another glass of bourbon, then sat across from him with his cigar.

"When do you make the five-thousand-dollar pitch?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh," Landrigan said.

He got up quickly and went to a small, flimsy-looking piece of furniture in one corner. Jimmy guessed it was something French, expensive, and probably old, but he knew fuck all about furniture. But he definitely knew that Landrigan took a stack of cash out of the top drawer, dropped it into his lap, and then sat back down with his cigar.

"Five grand, as promised."

Jimmy picked it up. It still had the bank strip on it. "I could walk out now."

"You could," Landrigan said, "but you only had a nap on that bed. My guess is you want at least one full night."

It was a good guess, but Jimmy didn't let him know that. He set the five Gs back down on his lap and sipped his bourbon.

"Okay, Harold, make your pitch. Who do you want me to kill?"

Harold Landrigan waved his hand and said, "We don't do that, you and I, Jimmy."

"What do you think I was in for?"

"Man two," he said. "I know what you were in for. You hit a guy and he died. From what I found out, he deserved it."

"He deserved to be hit," Jimmy said, "but maybe he didn't deserve to die."

"And you didn't deserve to go inside for fifteen years," he

said. "You didn't belong in there any more than I did. You never talked about it, but somebody railroaded you, same as me."

True, but Jimmy knew he belonged inside more than Landrigan did.

"Jimmy, I want to help get you back on your feet," he said. "Even better. I want to set you up."

"So what do I have to do?"

He hesitated a moment, studied his cigar. Jimmy gave him the time to find the words.

"My only child is twenty-one," he said, "and hates me. My wife died while I was inside. She couldn't take the disgrace, and I take full blame for her death. She died of humiliation and a broken heart."

"Your only child?" Jimmy felt Harold was leaving something out purposely. "Your son?"

"My daughter," he said. "Kat."

"Is she a runaway or something?"

"No," Harold said. "I know where she is. I set her up in a condo in LA, and I send her a cash allowance every month."

"Lucky girl."

"Don't misunderstand," Harold said. "I made her take the deal. She wanted to go off on her own. I convinced her to make me pay for my mistake, so I cover all her expenses."

Harold drew on his cigar, then studied it again—the lit end this time—while he let the smoke out in a long, slow stream.

"I want to do the same for you, Jimmy."

"Set me up, pay my expenses?" Jimmy asked. "For what? Come on, Harold, drop the other shoe."

"The girl wants to play on the poker tour, Jimmy," he said finally. "I want you to help her."

"Teach her to play poker? That's not my style."

"Oh, come on," Harold said, cutting him off. "As I understand it, she's quite good. It'll be easy."

"Then what does she need me for?"

"She's young, cocky, stubborn . . . I think they'll eat her up on the tour. I want you to . . . look out for her, make sure she doesn't get into trouble."

"I'm not a babysitter, Harold."

"This won't be babysitting," Harold insisted. "I want you to—" he groped for the right words, "be her friend, maybe even her mentor. Just keep an eye on her."

Still sounded like a babysitter to Jimmy.

"Let her learn from you and keep her safe."

"So babysitter, bodyguard, and tutor. What else would you like?"

"Well, actually," Landrigan said, "to soften her up a bit."

"Soften her up?"

"You know, get her to be . . . more feminine. The way she dresses and acts now, men might think she's . . . well, a dyke. Maybe you could make a lady out of her."

"Oh, so now I'm Miss Fucking Manners?"

"Damn it!"

He'd succeeded in frustrating Landrigan, and he immediately regretted it.

"All right, Harold," he said soothingly. "I know what you want me to do."

"So you'll do it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm going on the tour myself," Jimmy said, and added to himself, as soon as I raise a stake. "I don't have time to be a . . . I don't have time, Harold—"

"Ten grand."

"What?"

"If you don't have the time to do it as a favor, let's make it a straight business deal."

"Ten grand over the five I have here?"

"No," he said. "Ten grand a month."

"Harold—"

"I'll set you up, buy you a condo," he said, ticking items off on his fingers, "pay your expenses—including the buy in for any tournament you want to play in—and deposit ten thousand dollars in a bank account for you every month."

Jimmy hesitated, then asked, "And I have access to that bank account?"

"It's yours," he said. "You'll be able to deposit and withdraw. With ATMs you'll have twenty-four-hour access."

"And you're willing to do all this for a kid who hates you?"

Harold shrugged. "She's my daughter," he answered. "What can I say? I love her. Do we have a deal?"

Harold sat forward in his chair, with the cigar he'd been studying so intently now forgotten in his left hand. He extended his right to Jimmy, who took it.

"There is a catch, though."

Jimmy knew it. "What is it?"

"She can never find out that you're working for me. If she does, she'll hate both of us, and the cash will stop."

"Well, that part doesn't sound very fair."

"What do you mean?"

"You have a head start."

SEVEN

Jimmy remembered the first time he saw the kid. She was hanging around the pool.

As promised, by the time he got to LA his condo was ready, as was his bank account, the first installment already on deposit. He also stuck most of the fifteen Gs Harold had given him in there, so he had a pretty good bank balance. For the hell of it he hit an ATM for three hundred dollars just to make sure he could.

His place had five rooms, and he was surprised to find a note from Harold taped to the refrigerator. "Had a designer come in and do up the place the way I thought you'd like it. If you want to change anything, give him a call." The man's business card was stapled to the note. Jimmy tore it up and deposited it in his spanking new stainless steel kitchen garbage can.

The condo had hardwood floors, dark wood paneling, and lots of windows. When you've been in stir for ten years, you kinda miss windows. Harold had only been in for two, but obviously he knew that. Jimmy hadn't had the desire to change anything. He was just glad not to be living in a huge cement box with hundreds of other guys.

He walked out onto the terrace which, since he was on the second floor, had a great view of the pool. At that moment there were only three people around the pool. Two were male and the

third was Kat Landrigan. He'd been hoping for some girls in bikinis. What women were wearing now was certainly different from ten years ago. One thing he really liked was how girls showed off their midriffs and belly buttons. But recently the navels seemed to have moved five or six inches north of the belt lines. Sometimes there was this huge expanse of flesh with the shirt actually covering the navel. At times it looked to him as if women had lost their belly buttons entirely.

Jimmy recognized Kat from a recent picture Harold had given him. She was a little bit of a thing, wearing a two-piece bathing suit, even though she didn't have much in the way of curves to show off. In fact, the two dudes playing poker with her weren't paying much attention to her at all, other than when they had to. Even from his balcony Jimmy could read the body language, a talent he'd always had but honed to near perfection in the joint. You never knew what another prisoner had in mind when he was approaching you, unless you learned to read him. The guys weren't flirting with her and she was concentrating on her cards, even in a game that was taking place on a chaise lounge instead of a felt tabletop. According to her father, all she cared about was playing poker. To the "detriment" he'd said, of all other aspects of her life. Jimmy had told Landrigan if that was the case, she already had the correct mind-set to be a solid professional. It remained to be seen if she had the skills to go with it.

Jimmy wasn't ready to meet her, though, not that first day. He went into the bedroom and found the closet and dresser drawers filled with clothes, all in his size, including three different bathing suits. He tossed them, though. He wasn't really a bathing suit kind of guy. He'd buy something else to wear around the pool if, indeed, that was where he chose to make young Kat's acquaintance.

He sat on the king-size bed—covered with a two-tone brown bedspread—and looked around. The walls were cream colored, the furnishings plain but costly. He recognized quality when he saw it; he just could never have named the furniture makers or artists.

He was the product of two educations. His first was growing up in Philadelphia with a cop for a father. He went to public schools, worked odd jobs, got himself a college education that he ultimately never used because, by then, he was making money playing poker. But what college had done was smooth out any rough edges he might have had from the streets of Philly and from his dad and his cop buddies.

In Vegas he had never become a superstar during the eighties and nineties, preferring to remain under the radar while playing in lucrative side games.

His second education came on the inside. He went into prison as a "fish," an innocent first timer, but came out as someone who'd learned to survive. His rough edges not only back but razor sharp.

What he had to do now that he was on the outside again was find a balance between the two schools he'd been to and make them both work for him. He wasn't some ex-con with a chip on his shoulder and an eighth-grade education, but he also wasn't some Ivy League asshole.

And before he could take a kid under his wing—especially a girl—he had to find the real Jimmy Spain.

◆

He spent a month building his cover: passing Kat in the hall, getting his mail when she did, seeing her at the pool. During

that time he played poker in various poker rooms around town to get his timing back, but he made sure he didn't frequent any of the rooms she went to. It wasn't easy: the kid played a lot.

However, by the end of the month he started showing up in the same places. One or two times he sat at the same table to observe her. She was so into the game that he didn't think she even recognized him. That was the first chink he found in her game, which he intended to address when the time came. Too much time spent on her own cards, not enough time watching the other players at the table.

She dressed horribly, too. And she was obnoxious, smacking her chewing gum, talking fast and smart: "Are you all in, baby? I thought I felt a tickle." He still wasn't Miss Manners, but he thought he could help her out there, too.

When he finally made up his mind to meet her, he figured the pool was as good a place as any. It had been March when he first arrived at the condo, and by April he decided to make his move. Jimmy contrived to be at the pool before her that day, armed with a deck of cards and a copy of Brunson's book.

He had time to watch the men and women—or boys and girls—at play. The men wore what looked like bikini briefs, and the girls showed off everything they had in the tiniest two-piece suits.

Jimmy wore full trunks and a yellow sports shirt which he left open. He had none of the insecurities of the men who needed to show off their package, in tiny briefs.

When he spotted her coming through the gate carrying a towel and an iPod he quickly dealt out two hands and a flop. Knowing in advance which chaise lounge she preferred he had situated himself so that she'd have to walk past him and the white table he was sitting at. He made sure he was staring down at the cards

when she reached him. There was no guarantee she'd stop, or even see what he was doing, so it was with great satisfaction that he felt her pause next to him. He was about to look up, when she reached down to look at the opposing hand he'd dealt.

"Looks like you're screwed, dude," she said. "You dealt him a pair of kings and he flopped a set."

He looked up at her. She was wearing a powder-blue two-piece bathing suit. It wasn't exactly a California bikini, but he was able to see that her belly button was pierced and there was a tattoo on her tanned midriff that was so small he would have had to lean in closer to make it out. She was flat chested and seemed to have the hips of a fourteen-year-old boy. As he'd noticed before in the poker rooms, she had multiple piercings in both ears and a ring through her right eyebrow. Her jet-black hair was cut very short, spiked with purple highlights. And her fingernails were painted black.

"You want to play the hand?" he asked.

He had to squint up at her despite wearing sunglasses. As if sensing this she moved so that he was in her shadow.

"You know what I have."

"You don't know what I have," he said.

She studied him for a moment, probably dismissing the thought that he might be hitting on her because she'd stopped and spoken to him first. She was wearing sunglasses, which masked her expression somewhat, and he couldn't see the color of her eyes.

"Okay," she said with a shrug.

"What about your two partners?" he asked, jerking his head toward the two guys she usually played with.

"Dude, they'll live."

She sat opposite him and put her iPod on the table next to what were now her two hole cards.

"What are we playin' for?" she asked.

There was no hint of flirtation in her tone.

"I don't know," he said. "Do we have to be playin' for somethin'?"

"I usually play for money," she said. "I don't see the point of poker if you're not playin' for somethin'."

He patted his breast pocket and said, "Got nothing on me."

"Well," she replied, looking down at herself, "obviously neither do I."

"Then let's play for drinks," Spain proposed.

"What?"

"Winner buys the loser drinks at the bar of their choice."

"You tryin' to slow play me, dude? Because I don't go on tilt."

Spain looked at her curiously. He had never heard those poker terms used so casually out of context. He thought it was a little bit strange. He lowered his glasses so he could peer at her over them.

"You are old enough to drink, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she said, "yeah, I'm old enough to drink. Don't bluff me, dude."

Ouch. The poker talk. He wondered if she did that all the time.

"Let's play poker," he said.

They both looked down at the flop. There was a king, an eight, and a six on the table, off suit. She'd already told him she had two kings in the hole.

"I'll bet one drink," she said.

"Call," he said. "Fourth Street comin' out."

He dealt out the fourth community card. It paired the eight on the table. If she was telling the truth and had flopped a set of kings, she now had a full house.

"Whoa," she said. "That hurts, don't it?"

He'd heard her trash talk at the tables before. Pretty obvious stuff.

"Why don't we wait and see who hurts worse? I bet two drinks—the hard stuff, not beer or wine," he said.

"I drink scotch, dude," she told him. "I raise two more."

"You're called."

"You're crazy." She was grinning. He could see she was having fun. Gonna teach the old dude a lesson, she was thinking.

"Fifth Street."

"The riv-ah. Down and dirty," she said.

Now it was confirmed. She was a cornball.

The river card didn't help either one of them, but the only thing that could have improved her hand was a fourth king.

"Three drinks. Can you handle three drinks?" he asked.

"I can drink you under the table, old dude. I raise three more," she said.

"I reraise," he said. "Ah, let's go all in. Let's say twenty drinks. You're gonna have some hangover."

"You're raisin' me? All in?" she asked.

"That's right."

"And you know I've got a full house? What, dude, you sayin' you got four of a kind? That is so bullshit."

She stared at him a moment, then down at the cards.

He stared back. "Put the puzzle together, Morticia." He was giving her her first lesson and she didn't even know it.

"I think you're full of shit. But if we were playin' for real

money and not just cocktails, I'd still have to call. Even if you had your four eights I'd be pot committed. So call, dude."

Jimmy blinked at her. She had finally used poker lingo in the right place.

"What's your name?"

"What does that matter?"

"Apparently, we're neighbors," he said. "I like to know my neighbor's name. I also like to know the name of the person who's going to be buying me a bunch of drinks for playing like a jackass."

"Kat," she said. "My name's Kat Landrigan. Now can we turn the cards over?"

He extended his right hand as he turned his cards.

"Jimmy Spain . . . and can you beat four eights?"

EIGHT

"Man, I thought you were bluffin'."

"Obviously I wasn't."

After each had gotten dressed, they walked to a neighborhood bar so Jimmy could collect a part of his drink winnings. Kat was now wearing jeans and a T-shirt that said I GO ALL IN. She was also chewing gum and snapping it. He found it annoying but didn't say anything—yet. He'd changed into khaki trousers and another sports shirt. She got carded, and Jimmy got both dirty looks and winks from some of the other patrons as they sat at the bar.

"You were so lucky," she said.

"Yes, I was, and now you are, if you learned something."

The bartender set down his Newcastle and her scotch.

"So, you just couldn't lay it down, huh?" he asked.

"Dude, I had a feelin' you had the nuts, but, still, I was pot committed. I gotta make that call."

"Wrong. You weren't pot committed. My all-in bet was going to break you. And you never reraise into a possible cinch. And don't forget, a good lay down separates the goods from the greats."

"You talk like you're a pro. Are you?" she asked.

"As it happens," he said, sipping his beer, "yes."

"Wait." She set her drink down without tasting it and stared at him again. "You're a professional gambler?"

"No," he said. "I'm a professional poker player. My gambling's another story."

"If you're a pro, dude, why are you readin' the Brunson book?"

"Just keeping sharp," he said. "I've been out of circulation awhile, but I'm getting ready to come back in. I'm just boning up."

"You're gonna play against Texas Dolly? That's the nuts!"

"I'm going to be playing in tournaments," he said. "I'll be playing against all the—" He stopped himself, her weird poker speak finally getting to him. "By the way, what's with you and the poker lingo? Don't you think you're pushing that a little bit?"

She shrugged. "It's just a habit. Poker's my life, you know."

"Right. Okay, so I'm going to be playing against all the great players again."

"Again? You've played against them before?"

"Once or twice in money games."

"Are you goin' on the tour?" Her eyes were shining and she still had not taken a sip of her drink.

"The tour?"

"The WPT tour."

"I think I'll have to. That's where the money is. All the big cash games and, of course, the tournaments."

"Okay, look, dude," she said, "this is, like, fate. This is jackpot time for me. You gotta help me."

"With what?"

"I want to play on the tour."

He'd gone over in his mind how best to respond to this statement, knowing that it was coming.

"No way."

She leaned back as if he'd slapped her.

"Why not?"

"Look at you."

"What's wrong with me?"

He hesitated, took a swallow of beer, then set his glass down on the bar.

"You mean besides the black nail polish, purple hair, and piercings?"

Her face colored. "What's that got to do with playin' poker?"

"All right. I'll tell you a secret."

"What?"

"I've seen you play around town. We go to some of the same places. In fact, I sat at a table with you once."

"You did? I didn't see you."

"That's because you pay too much attention to your cards and not enough to the other players."

She laughed derisively. "How can you pay too much attention to your cards?"

"Look, Kat, I've seen the best hand lose to the better player more times than I can count."

"Yeah, but isn't the best player the one with the best hand?"

Jimmy shook his head sadly.

"You've got a lot to learn."

"Then teach me, dude. This is what I'm sayin'. I wanna go all in on this. I wanna be the best."

Here came the touchy part. He knew he'd have to be careful not to agree too readily.

"I'm no teacher, kid. Read the books."

"I have read the books," she said. "Brunson, Caro, Phil Hellmuth, but there's only so much you can learn from books."

"How do you even know I'm who I say I am?" he asked. "What makes you think you can believe me?"

"I have a built-in bullshit meter," she said. "It's tellin' me you're okay. It's tellin' me you're the nuts."

"Okay, you have to stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Throwing poker terms into the conversation. It's getting silly."

He could see she wanted to be insulted, but instead she let it slide.

"Well . . . okay."

"And at your age you've got a reliable bullshit meter?"

"Comes from living with my father for so long," she said. "The man was full of it."

"And what's he full of now?"

She smiled. "Cash. I'll pay you to teach me."

Now this would be tricky. If he turned down money he had better have a good reason.

"Look," she continued, "you said you've seen me play. Why aren't you just tellin' me no, forget it, I can't play? I'll tell you why. Because I have talent and you know it."

"Okay, it's true," he said. "You have some raw talent, but there's so much of your game that is underdeveloped."

"Look, dude," she said, "the World Series of Poker just ended. We've got a whole year before the next one. In the meantime there's WPT events. All kinds of action. I'm serious about paying you."

"I don't need your money." Especially when he was taking her old man's.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I have my own game to think about."

"If you're a pro like you say, your game is set," she said.

"It's a bit rusty."

"Why?"

"I've been . . . away from the tables for a while."

He was looking into her eyes and could see her mind racing.

"Maybe," she said quickly, "maybe by helping me you can help yourself."

"How's that?"

"By startin' from scratch. By helpin' me bring my game up, maybe you'll get your game back."

Whether or not her logic was faulty she had given him a way in.

"Okay."

She hesitated, then said, "What?" as if she hadn't heard him right.

"I said okay," he repeated. "Let's give it a shot."

"Do you mean it? No bluff?"

"Yeah," he said. "I mean it. No bluff. But first thing?"

"Yeah?"

"Get rid of the gum," he said. "The snapping drives me crazy." He had a cell mate who used to do the same thing. The guy wouldn't quit. Worst six months of his stretch. Almost.

Her eyes lit up. She threw her arms wide and leaped at him. He had no choice but to catch her.

"Oh, dude, thank you!"

Holding her in his arms he was catching still more looks from the other patrons, but he ignored them.

So much for her bullshit meter.

NINE

The present . . .

As a rule players can take a break every two hours in addition to the dinner break. Even if they aren't at the table, an ante will be taken from their chip stack, as well as the blinds, mandatory bets from two players—the small blind and the big blind—that are used to build the pot. On the first day the blinds are small enough that a player can stay away for hours and still have most of his or her chips left by the end of play. By the time a player gets to the final table, however, the blinds go up considerably, and if a player stays away too long he will be blinded off for big money. And that would be pure suicide. . . .

Although Jimmy had laid back most of the afternoon, he had taken two nice pots, increasing his chip count to the point where breaks would not be a problem. As in all tournaments, there was a dinner break of about an hour. The tournament had started at noon, and the play would continue well into the night.

When the dinner break hit, Jimmy tried to sneak away for a quick bite. He looked over at Kat, who was in animated conversation with three other players.

Spain called across the room, "Are you eating?"

"I'm not hungry, dude," Kat called back, as overexcited as a puppy. "I've doubled my chip stack. I don't need the distraction."

She went confidently back to her conversation, and he was on his own for dinner.

He knew that Doyle Brunson, Dallas Jack, and some of the old-timers still went to Binion's Steakhouse, at the top of Binion's Horseshoe downtown on Fremont Street, but of course there was no time for that. They'd probably opt for some fancy place inside the Bellagio. He decided to get a sandwich at Snacks, the snack bar next to the Race & Sports Book. He was about to go in when he heard a sultry voice call his name.

He turned, recognized the person, and said, "Well, hello."

Sabine Chevalier stood just outside the snack bar. He noticed how violet her eyes looked today. Either they hadn't appeared that color the night before, or he'd been concentrating so hard on his cards he hadn't noticed.

"Mr. Spain," she said. "What a coincidence. Taking your dinner break here?"

"That's right," he said. "Just a quick bite."

"Oh, we can do better than this, *mais oui,*" she said. "I have reservations at Prime, and I'm dining alone. Would you care to join me?" Like most men he found her accent charming.

"How could I refuse an invitation like that?"

As they walked through the casino she said, "We did not have an opportunity to meet last night, but I watched you play."

"I saw you there."

"I was very impressed."

"So was I."

She might have blushed. He couldn't be sure because she turned her head at that moment.

Prime was one of the best steakhouses in Las Vegas and the Bellagio's signature restaurant. When they arrived, there was a

line waiting to get in, but, true to her word, Sabine had a reservation and they were seated immediately.

They dutifully followed the hostess, who walked them past the bar, where Mike Sexton was standing with Steve Lipscomb, his boss and the driving force behind the WPT. He and Jimmy exchanged nods.

The hostess laid the menus on a table by the window, which had a remarkable view of the dancing waters outside.

"Your server, Anthony, will be right with you."

"I'm impressed," Jimmy said again, as they seated themselves across from each other. "This is a great table."

"I requested a table by the window."

They picked up their menus.

"I've never eaten here before," he said. Small talk. "I've heard a lot about their steaks."

"I eat here whenever I can," she said, "and I usually have the sea bass. *Magnifique.*"

"I have steak when I can." He didn't tell her how much he'd missed it when he was inside, and even though he'd been out over a year he still ordered it before anything else.

A bow-tied young man appeared at their table and introduced himself. This was something Jimmy hadn't gotten used to yet since he'd returned to the world: wait staff who introduced themselves.

He asked if they'd like a drink.

"I am going to have champagne," Sabine told Jimmy.

"I'll join you," he said. "That way we can get a bottle."

"French champagne?" she asked.

He smiled and said, "What else."

That obviously pleased her, and he allowed her to order.

"Very well. I'll get your champagne—" the waiter began.

"We are ready to order, *c'est vrai*?" Sabine asked Jimmy, cutting the waiter off. "I'm starved."

Jimmy said he was. Sabine ordered her bass and a salad of field greens in a sherry vinaigrette. For a vegetable she took the ginger sweet potatoes. Jimmy asked for the porterhouse, medium, with the Tuscan fries and a Caesar salad.

"We're playing in the poker tournament," Jimmy told him.

"I understand, sir," Anthony said. "I'll put a rush on everything."

"How are you doing, by the way?" she asked when the waiter left.

"Okay," he said. "I've got about sixteen thousand in chips."

"Really? I have close to fourteen."

"Not bad. A lot of players have busted out already."

She nodded with a slight smile.

Jimmy looked around at the Baccarat chandeliers, the plush furnishings, and all the gilt. This was the new Vegas, and while he preferred the old one, Bellagio was the classiest of the new.

He noticed that Mike Sexton was watching them. He could tell because the man looked away when Jimmy caught him. He wondered who was capturing Sexton's attention, him or the beautiful woman across the table?

He looked at Sabine. She had an impossibly clear complexion which, at first glance, made you guess her age at somewhere in her late twenties. Upon closer inspection, however, the small lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth moved her into her early thirties. She was made all the more stunning for it, though. She was wearing a black dress that might have been called simple on another woman. On Sabine Chevalier it was special. He couldn't imagine that she had been playing poker in it all day.

"You look very nice."

"*Merci.* Ah, but you are wearing a suit. Not a lot of men wear suits to play poker."

"Just an old custom of mine," he said.

He had felt a little out of place at first, but then decided not to change his style. Besides, it was unavoidable that having been in prison would color every aspect of his life. Once out, food tasted better, air smelled better, and he felt a need to dress. "I like wearing suits . . . and ties, which I notice have pretty much gone out of style."

"You speak as if you have been away."

"I . . . have been out of circulation for a while."

"I wondered about that last night."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You play well, and I was wondering why I had not heard of you or seen you at any other tournaments."

Her accent was very subtle, just barely there at times.

"I've been playing in money games for most of my life," he said. "The past few months I've been in the California casinos and poker rooms."

"Have you played against Todd Brunson?"

"Todd? I know Doyle, but . . ."

"Todd is his son. He is supposed to be one of the ten-most-deadly money-game players."

"I see."

"Wait." She placed her elbow on the table, her chin in her hand. He noticed how well toned her upper arms were. "You said you know Doyle or you know of him?"

"I know him," he said. "Not well, but I've played against him, so I guess you could say I know him at the table, but we're not personal friends."

"You have played against Doyle in money games?"

"In Texas, years ago."

"You have no accent, so you are not a Texan."

"No," he said. "I'm from Philadelphia, but Texas was where the big money games were back then."

"Years ago," she repeated. "You sound so old. You cannot be more than . . . what? Forty-two, three?"

"Three," he said. "Should we discuss your age?"

She removed her chin from her hand and sat back. "I would rather talk about poker."

"All right," he said. "Let's talk about poker."

Although their conversation moved from poker on to other things, Jimmy felt they were playing the game—two games, in fact. One was the oldest game, of course, the one men and women had been playing for years. The second game, though, that was the one where two poker players—even if they're not sitting at a green felt table—are feeling each other out, looking for tells.

Sabine showed she knew what was going on as well when she leaned forward during dessert—chocolate lava cake for both of them—and said, "What are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are we flirting?" she asked. "Or looking for weaknesses in each other?"

"Would you like me to be flirting?" he asked with a small smile.

"Well," she said, "it wouldn't be at all bad for my ego."

"All right then," he said, "we're flirting. Or, at least, I am."

"No," she said, "no, I am, too."

"Playing the game."

"Dancing the dance."

"But let's be realistic," he said. "We might very well be sitting at the same table—maybe the final table—later this week."

"So?"

"So we can't help but study each other, even when we don't think we're watching."

"It's unavoidable," she said, spreading her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"And a shame."

She sat back in her chair. "Nothing can happen," she said.

"Nothing."

"Until the tournament is over."

"That's true."

Jimmy wondered now if they were just flirting or actually making some kind of date.

◆

When Jimmy and Sabine were about to leave Prime to return to the game Sabine excused herself to go to the ladies' room. He decided to make a pit stop as well. After he washed his hands he was about to open the door when Mike Sexton came surging in.

"Mike, you scared the crap out of me."

"Jimmy, Jimmy," Sexton said, "I been tryin' to get your attention."

So he had been looking at Jimmy and not the girl.

"What's on your mind, Mike?"

"Sabine," Sexton said. "You've got to be a little bit careful about her. She's not quite what she seems."

"Well, whatever she is, she's probably waiting for me outside . . ."

"No, listen," Sexton said, "what she is now, she wasn't always that way. She grew up hard, Jimmy, on the streets of Paris."

"Really, Mike? The mean streets of Paris," said Jimmy sarcastically.

"I'm serious, Jimmy," Sexton said. "She's a gypsy. She grew up lyin' and stealin' and pullin' cons for years. And let me tell you somethin'. She did everything . . . everything you can think of." Mike stared at Jimmy in an ominous way. He didn't need to say more.

Jimmy got it. Sexton had just given him a little insight into Sabine's past. Obviously, this whole classy lady thing was overcompensating for her background.

"Okay, Mike," he said, touching the man's arm. "Thanks for the info."

He was waiting for Sabine when she came out but did not mention Sexton's comments. It wasn't the time or place, but it sure did make her more interesting.

TEN

Jimmy sat back the first day and allowed other players at the table to eliminate one another. He might as well have been reading a book for all the hands he was involved in. His play was not as aggressive as it usually was, but he'd decided that this was a good tactic for both him and Kat to adopt. Don't play tricky against the weaker players, just solid. He was sort of an unknown except to certain players, and to them he would be something of an enigma.

What he didn't know was that by the end of the first day Kat had already gone all in twice and survived, creating a bit of a stir at her table and attracting the attention of some other players—specifically that of a young man named Tim Bennett.

Bennett was twenty-three. He and his posse were at the vanguard of the current poker craze. They were Internet players who had taken the poker world by storm, and all of them were under the age of twenty-four. They even had Possepoker.net that was quickly becoming one of the fastest-growing sites in the world. Bennett was becoming a star and he knew it. Arrogance was his middle name.

Bennett sat at Kat's table and saw her as a possible ally. The first time she went all in against one of the old pros and eliminated him, Bennett sat up and took a good look at her. Initially, he'd thought her an oddity with her purple hair, black fingernails,

and all those piercings—probably some rich kid who decided she wanted to play against the pros, maybe get some TV time for looking Goth. Bennett and his buddies considered themselves cool, even though they dressed very J.Crew and the commentators affectionately called them preppies and geeks. They were geeks who had already collected some World Series bracelets and a couple of final tables on the World Poker Tour and were making names for themselves.

During a break Bennett put his head together with two of his posse, Eddie Brouchet and Jesse Dell, and talked about Kat.

"She's fearless, I tell you," he said. "We need to sign her up."

"A girl?" Dell asked. "Why do we need a girl?"

"Well," Bennett said, "basically because I say so, Jesse. Besides, you know we're looking for a young chick for the site who can really play and has attitude. She might be the one."

"I vote no," Dell said.

Bennett looked at Brouchet. Between them they had three pieces of World Series jewelry, the only three the posse had earned.

"Hey, Jesse," Bennett said, "when you get a bracelet on your wrist, then you get a vote, okay?"

Dell closed his mouth, pouting. The acne on his chubby cheeks seemed to glow. It wasn't his fault that earlier that year he'd been eliminated from the WS on the first hand when his tens full had run into another player's kings full. It wasn't fair.

"I'm gonna approach her first chance I get," Bennett told Brouchet.

"Fine with me. Is she good-looking?"

"She's a Goth chick, Eddie," Bennett said. "They scare you, remember?"

"They don't scare me," Brouchet whined. "I've just never been out with one."

Brouchet was slightly built, with eyes that were too moist behind thick glasses and lips that were too red. Bennett suspected him of being gay and often jabbed at him about it.

"A Goth chick, Eddie?" he asked with a wicked smile. "Or a girl?"

"Damn it, Tim—"

"Forget it, forget it," Bennett said, slapping Brouchet on the arm. "Let's get back to our tables. I'll let you and the others know tonight what she said."

"Should we tell the others?" Dell asked.

"Sure, go ahead," Bennett said. He knew damn well that nobody's vote counted but his. An egomaniac under normal circumstances, the fact that ESPN had done a small feature on him during the WS had inflated his conceit to impossible proportions.

No, the chick was not a knockout by any means, but there was something about her. Once he introduced himself she'd melt and maybe he'd toss her one just to initiate her into the group.

Lucky girl.

♦

Kat had some first afternoon. Twice she had monster hands and each time found herself up against top players. Not a big name, by any means, but solid. It was a thrill to knock them out of the tournament! She knew Jimmy was going to be excited for her when he heard.

After the second all in she could feel the eyes of other players on her. Excitedly, she'd wondered if the cameras had caught it. Wouldn't that just be too awesome to be on TV in her first tournament? There were 445 entries at the start of the tournament.

With each player putting up fifteen thousand dollars, there was a total prize pool of over six million. The winner was going to take home a 1.8-million-dollar first prize. Half the field was going to be eliminated that first day in the five-day tournament. Right now she was confident she would not be one of those victims.

There was one dude at the table who was her age, maybe a little older, and she caught him watching her. She definitely recognized him but couldn't remember his name. Then it came to her—Tim Bennett, king of the Internet players. Maybe he was hot for her, but he was too much of a preppy. Still, he was a good player, that much was obvious. Later in the day, on a break, he approached her. She couldn't believe the attention she was getting from this budding superstar.

"Your play is pretty aggressive," he told her.

"Thanks."

"My name is Tim Bennett."

He put his hand out. She gushed as she shook it. "Kat Landrigan. Yeah, that's right, that's who you are. I knew it. You're the guy with that group—"

"Possepoker, the coolest and fastest growing site in the world. If you hadn't noticed, I'm the spokesperson."

"Right, right, I remember. Dude, that's so cool. I'm stayin' out of your pots for the rest of the night."

"You play your game. I'm not worried. Did you play in a satellite to get here?"

She smiled and said proudly, "No, I paid my way."

"Excellent. The girl's got some cash. First time on the WPT. Right?"

"That's right, and I've already doubled my chip stack."

"You're pretty cocky for an amateur."

Kat's smile froze. She didn't like being called an amateur, even

by a young poker star like him. Maybe he was just trying to be funny.

"Why don't you have a drink with me and my guys tonight after we close up shop here?" he said. "You're old enough to party, aren't you?"

"Dude, I'm a party animal. I go all in when I hear party."

"I bet you do." Bennett smiled crudely.

Deep inside, Kat felt disrespected but was still too starstruck to realize it.

Jimmy Spain sauntered up to the table, having heard that last remark, but didn't interrupt at first.

"Hey, I'm not talking about a date," he said. "I'm talking about a big opportunity for you."

"Oh, yeah?" She was beside herself.

"We're pretty much the happening thing in poker, you know." He lowered his voice, as if confiding in her. "We're gonna rule for a long time to come, show these old-timers it's time to retire. Did you see Brunson? He can't even move anymore."

To disrespect Doyle Brunson was, in her mind, the worst offense this young man could commit. She was starting to lower her opinion of Tim Bennett. "Dude, that's not cool. He's still the best poker player on the planet."

"Not a chance. Have you seen me play?"

She had. He was no Doyle. Her young poker stud was quickly turning into a computer geek. An obnoxious one, at that. He needed to be put in his place.

"Yeah, I have. You're not that good."

At that moment Jimmy Spain came up and put his hand on Kat's arm, starting to pull her away.

"Hey, I've been looking for you. We've got to talk strategy."

Before she could answer, Bennett angrily said, "Oh, I get it. Old school here is your teacher? That's pathetic."

Kat got in Bennett's face. "Whoa, computer boy, hold up. Just because you and your computer nerd friends have gotten lucky once or twice don't make you king of the hill around here. If anybody's got anything to prove, it's you. This is Jimmy Spain. This dude's forgotten more about poker than you and your friends will ever know. You don't diss him or Doyle Brunson around me."

Bennett looked stunned, and then the anger started to seep in.

"You ungrateful bitch," he hissed.

"Hey, easy," Jimmy said.

"Ungrateful because I don't want to get gangbanged by a bunch of preppy nerds? Jesus"—Kat laughed—"half of you are probably still virgins."

"I've got two bracelets, you little bitch," Bennett said. "What've you got?"

"You're raising your voice, you little shit," Jimmy said, stepping closer. "Not around a lady. Come on, Kat. Let's get out of here."

They walked away.

Bennett was still seething when Lenny Krieger approached him.

"Get shot down, Tim? I never would have thought that chick was your type."

"Shut up, Lenny."

"Hey, I sympathize," Krieger said. "I guess you could call her cute."

Bennett glared at Krieger. He had no time for him today or any other day. Krieger had been trying to join the posse since day one, trying to use his daddy's money to do it. Hell, they all

had trust funds—how else could they be playing poker for a living instead of finishing college? The only difference was Lenny Krieger didn't know Fifth Street from a hole in the ground. He stayed in too many hands, and he was panicked too easily. He'd be knocked out by the end of the first day. He was also obviously overcompensating for something, because he was a bodybuilder and liked to wear shirts tight enough to show off his muscles.

"Lenny, get the fuck away from me," Bennett said.

"Hey, don't be pissed at me. I didn't shoot you down. Uh, you guys gonna have dinner tonight? I thought maybe—"

"The posse has dinner with the posse, Lenny," Bennett said. "You're not one of us and you never will be. Get it?"

"Yeah, I get it, Tim," Krieger said sullenly. "But you're gonna get yours, too, one of these days."

Funny, Tim Bennett thought, that was exactly what he was thinking about that skinny, ungrateful Goth chick.

EL·EVEN

The thing Kat Landrigan liked most about Jimmy Spain was that he never once hit on her. Never even looked at her *that way*, the way a lot of men—older men—looked at her. Oh, she knew they disapproved of her appearance, but some also gave her those looks—the ones that made her feel uncomfortable and dirty.

There was never a hint of that from Jimmy, not in all the time he had been tutoring her.

She had known from the beginning that she was taking a chance when she first approached him. It was she who had made contact by the pool, she who had discovered what he did for a living, and she who had asked him to teach her. If he had turned out to be a big phony, she would have cut him loose with no harm done. But from the very first time they went to a poker room together, she could see that he knew his stuff.

From then on she listened intently to everything he had to say about the game.

Now, after all the time they'd spent together, she felt they had a real bond that went beyond any other relationship she'd ever had. Even though he was old enough to be her father, there was certainly no comparison there. And she'd had relationships with older men, but they didn't last, nor had they been as satisfying as this was. And without sex to screw things up she felt this friendship could last a long time.

By the end of the day Jimmy was pleased with his own play.

Half the field had been eliminated, and Jimmy had a very respectable twenty-five thousand dollars in chips, which was about the average for all the remaining players.

Holly, the young woman without a hotel room after the first night, didn't need to worry. She had busted out. She did manage to wink at Jimmy as she was walking away from the table and mouth, "Good luck." It was back to the office for her.

Chris Ferguson and Erik Siedel were still very much alive even though they had been moved to different tables. Tomorrow the tables would be reconfigured. Tonight Jimmy would compare notes with Kat over beer and wonton soup at Noodles. It was a good place for them to talk about the day's play and have a quick bite.

Jimmy and Kat were on their way to Noodles when he saw a man in an Aladdin Casino T-shirt and jeans bearing down on them, pulling a small woman along. He looked familiar to Jimmy, but it didn't come to him until the man was almost upon them.

"Go see if there's a table, kid," he told Kat.

"What? It's not time—"

"Go ahead," he said, giving her a little push. "I'll be along."

As a puzzled Kat walked away, the white-haired man reached Jimmy and, with a little frown, asked, "Jimmy Spain, right?"

"That's right."

"See, Margaret?" the man said to the woman. "I told you it was him."

"Yeah, you did," the soft-looking woman said. "I'm gonna go play the penny slots, Vic."

"Yeah, you do that," Vic said. He looked at Jimmy and shook his head. "We're in the Bellagio, the best casino on the Strip. And she wants to play penny slots."

Jimmy tried a smile, but it wouldn't come.

"Good God, man, it's good to see you." Vic Porcelli grabbed Jimmy's hand and began pumping it. There was still obvious power in the man's stocky frame.

"Yeah, good to see you, too, Vic."

"You remember me, don't ya?"

"Sure I do," Jimmy said. "My father was your first partner."

"He trained me," Vic Porcelli said. "Made me the cop I am today."

"What are you doing today, Vic?"

"I'm a captain of detectives, kid," Vic said. "A coupla years from retirement, though. Don't know if I'm gonna make it higher. Hey, you got time for a drink?"

"Uh, no, Vic, I really don't. I've got something to do."

"Okay, sure." Vic's blue eyes were startling, made more so by his ruddy complexion. "How about drinks with Margaret and me later? We can't afford to stay here—we're over at the Barbary Coast—but we can—"

"This thing I've got to do is going to tie me up all night, Vic."

"Huh," Vic said. "It's like that?" His face changed.

He thinks I'm blowing him off, Jimmy thought, and I am. He felt bad about it, but he didn't want to end up talking about his—

"Too bad about your dad," Vic said. "I heard what happened. I wish I could have come to the funeral."

"It was a small affair, just for family," Jimmy said. He gave Vic's hand a lackluster shake. "I'll see you, Vic."

"Yeah, yeah, you got things to do. I get it."

"Vic, I didn't mean—"

"Take it easy."

His father's old partner turned and went in search of his penny-slot-playing wife. It had been a lot of years since he'd seen Vic Porcelli. So many, in fact, that he was surprised the man had even recognized him.

◆

When they were seated with their beer and soup Kat very quickly explained to him how she had gone all in twice with huge hands and got paid off. Spain was excited for her. You don't always get action when you're dealt a good hand. But it wasn't always about winning or losing. You had to judge for yourself how well you played. That was the important thing. Anyone could win with good hands. Great players win when they play well. But she felt confident she played strong all day, as did Spain.

He sat back and stared at her. The strategy of keeping her Goth look was paying off. That must have been some distraction for her table.

"So how much you got?" he asked.

"About twenty-eight thousand."

"Good, you're doing better than me."

"What else is new, dude? I'm the nuts. No bluff."

"Hey, hey, hey, you're doing it again—the poker talk. It's disturbing."

"Okay, okay . . ."

"Don't get overconfident. We have a long tournament ahead of us. Don't forget the goal for this whole thing is to finish in the money, maybe make the final table. From there anything can happen."

"Dude, I'm gonna win this thing. That's my goal."

"Just eat your soup," he said, exasperated.

Kat went back to her wonton soup, took a big spoonful, but then reminded herself.

"Hey, dude, what did you think about that online freak Bennett? Can you believe what he said about you and Doyle?"

"Hey, you know what? The kid's a punk. You've got to ignore the guy."

"Easy for you to say."

"Just play your game, Kat. Remember your goal."

"Another thing, dude. What was that lady remark?"

"What?

"You called me a lady in front of that geek."

Spain remembered one of the reasons he was here. It was not just mentoring that Harold was paying for, it was making sure Kat didn't turn out to be Tonya Harding.

"Kat, you're not a girl, you're a woman. Don't you think you could try, just a little, to be more feminine?"

Kat flinched. Nothing could be more insulting than that. "Dude, I don't want to be feminine." She slurped some more soup.

"Look at the successful women in this game," he said. "They not only play well, they use their femininity. They're ladies."

"Dude, screw bein' a lady. I wanna be a poker player. They are animals out there. I'm one of them."

Jimmy decided to take a different approach. "How about

Cloney Gowan? There's a good example for you. And Evelyn Ng. Do you know why they dress and speak well? The feminine touch. In the long run it makes them more money at the table and from endorsements."

"What are you doin', dude?" she demanded. "Why you tryin' to change me all of a sudden? Muck this conversation."

"All I'm saying is think about it," he said. "The Goth you can still keep. It's good. But let's tweak it now. You could be more . . . feminine."

She fumed for a few moments over her soup, looked at him, and said, "I'll give it some thought, dude."

He spread his arms. "That's all I'm asking."

After a few moments she asked, "You gonna play in a side game tonight?"

"No."

"How about if I get into one?"

"Hey, you know the rules. You stay away from those, especially on a tournament night. Go to bed."

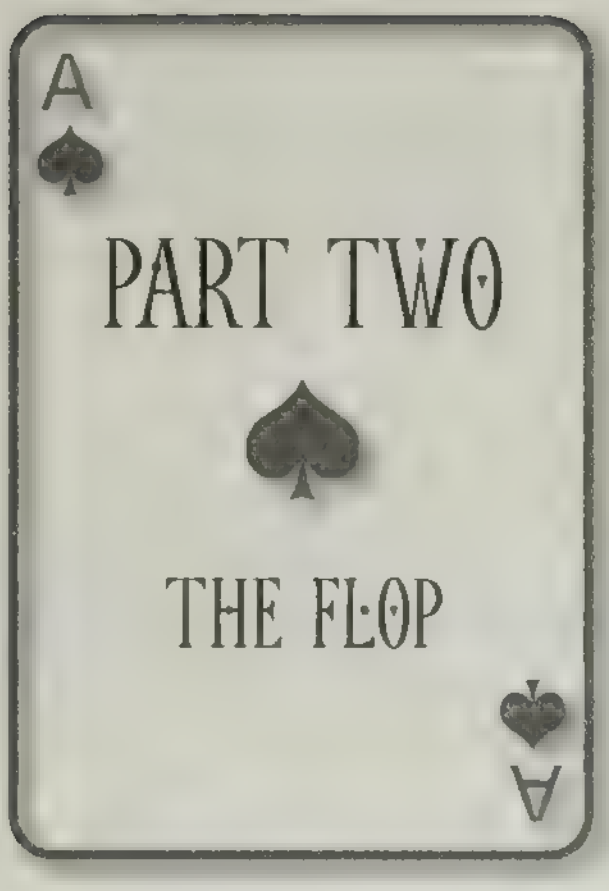
Her shoulders slumped. "Right."

"You want to do something tonight, play the slots but only for twenty minutes to unwind. Got it?"

"Dude, I got it."

"I'll see you in the morning, kid."

Maybe he'd gotten through to her about working the feminine angle, maybe not. He still had to get rid of her poker talk. He probably should be picking his battles.



When the dope kicks in, all is possible with the world.

—Jimmy Spain

TWELVE

Jimmy didn't sleep well that night.

It wasn't anything serious, just something that happened every once in a while since he got out. It was as if his body was afraid to go to sleep for fear of waking up in prison. When that happened he had to quit the bed and find something to do. When he was at home he'd turn on the TV, read, or go out to an all-night restaurant. Sometimes he'd find an all-night poker game. In Vegas it wa$n't a problem. He simply got dressed and went downstairs. It was one thing to tell Kat what the rules were, but he had earned the right to break them, so he went to the poker room.

He saw some of the pros sitting at high-limit tables. There were plenty of empty chairs, though, so he chose a table at a ten- to twenty-five-dollar blind, no-limit game just to kill time. He spent about an hour, won a few hundred dollars, and cashed out. He thought if he had to play only in the poker rooms in Vegas he'd shoot himself. It had become such a social event, people coming in and out of the game, asking how are you doing in the tournament—everyone an expert. They could tell you where to go to win, and eat, and get show tickets, and before long Jimmy wanted to shoot them and himself. He didn't mind trash-talking with other pros at a game, but these people were too much to take. He probably could have switched to a

higher-stakes table to avoid the tourists, but instead he chose to cash out.

When he left the poker room he was still not ready to go to sleep. He was considering yet another cup of coffee in the snack bar or—God forbid—actually putting money into a slot machine when he heard his name. He turned and couldn't believe his eyes when he saw who was coming toward him.

"Jimmy, boy, is that you?"

Paulie DiCicca had been two years into a five-year stretch when Jimmy'd gotten out. He was a con man, a hustler, a small-time grifter who thought he was the master of the short and long con. He talked so fast, and his voice was so high, that he sounded like Joe Pesci on helium.

He rushed up to Jimmy and grabbed him by the shoulders, which wasn't easy to do. Paulie was only five foot two, almost a foot shorter.

"I thought that was you. Man, you're lookin' real good. Everybody comes to Vegas, huh?"

"Paulie," Jimmy said, finally able to speak, "what are you doing in Vegas?"

"I got out," Paulie said, spreading his arms. "Good behavior. Can you believe it? Me?"

"Actually," Jimmy said, "I can't."

"Well, here I am," Paulie said. "Big as life. Got out last month and swore I'd come to Vegas. Took me this long to get here, and who do I see on my first night? My old friend Jimmy Spain."

"We were never friends, Paulie."

"Cell mates, once."

"For a week." Jimmy couldn't take him for any longer. He'd convinced the warden to split them up. Since the warden had a weakness for poker and needed some tutoring, he'd agreed.

"Hey," Paulie said magnanimously, "Cell mates for a week, buddies forever. Right? Right."

Jimmy cringed at Paulie's habit of saying the word "right" over and over again.

"Paulie," Jimmy said, "tell me this is a coincidence, us running into each other in Las Vegas this way."

Paulie stared up at Jimmy, who had to look away from the turtleneck sweater that was a painful shade of purple. It looked like something from the eighties.

"How could it be anythin' else?" the smaller man asked with a shrug. "I mean, how would I have found you here, huh?"

Paulie's heavy Queens accent was ever present and just one more reason to dislike him, as far as Jimmy was concerned—of which there were plenty.

"Paulie—"

"Okay," Paulie said quickly, "maybe it wasn't such a coincidence, huh?"

I knew it, Jimmy thought. Seeing Paulie DiCicca was never a good thing.

"Paulie, I don't even want to talk to you. Get it?"

"Hey," Paulie said, frowning. "I'm gettin' the feelin' you ain't glad to see me."

"A feeling?" Jimmy asked. "It's only a feeling?"

"Take it easy, Jimmy," Paulie said. "There ain't no need to get hostile. I got a proposition for ya."

"I'm not interested in a proposition from you—" Jimmy started.

"Beggin' yer pardon, Jimbo," Paulie said, "but you ain't heard it yet."

Jimmy closed his eyes. He hated being called Jimbo, and even more when it was Paulie using the sobriquet. "Paulie—"

"Jimmy," Paulie said, holding up his hands, "I know what you're gonna say, but I think you're gonna wanna give me some of your time."

"And why's that?"

Paulie looked around and, even though no one was near them, lowered his voice.

"I don't think you're gonna want this broadcast all over Vegas," he said. "Why don't we get a drink someplace?"

Jimmy studied the smaller man for a few moments. Paulie was bad news—there was no two ways about it. Having him show up in Vegas as if he knew he'd find Jimmy there was even worse. Jimmy suddenly felt he needed to know how Paulie had found him and why.

"Okay, Paulie," he said, putting his hand on the man's shoulder and squeezing. "Let's go find a nice quiet bar."

"Sure, Jimmy, sure," Paulie said, "but take it easy, will ya? If ya remember from stir, I bruise easy."

"I remember, Paulie," Jimmy assured him, "I remember."

Jimmy propelled Paulie DiCicca right out of the Bellagio and onto the street.

"Where we goin'?" Paulie demanded.

"Where nobody will see us together."

"Now yer tryin' ta hurt my self-esteem."

Jimmy didn't respond. They kept walking north until they were near the Boardwalk Casino. Only then did Jimmy duck into a bar. They each got a beer and found a table in a corner—although it wasn't dark enough to hide Paulie's shirt.

"Okay," he said to Paulie, "talk."

"I don't need much from you, Jimbo," Paulie said. "Just some introductions."

"To who?"

"Some of the high rollers."

"I don't know any gamblers, Paulie."

"Sure ya do," Paulie said. "The guys yer playin' poker with."

"Poker players?" Jimmy asked. "You want me to introduce you to poker players?"

"Sure, why not?" Paulie said. "They got plenty of money. They're prime for a good deal."

"You mean prime for one of your scams."

"You call 'em scams, I call 'em deals."

"Paulie," Jimmy said, "whatever put the thought in your little pea brain that I'd help you with this?"

"We're bros," Paulie said, "brothers under the skin, ya know? We got that bond ya form in stir—"

"Paulie—"

"I'll bet none of your friends here in the poker world know you're an ex-con."

Jimmy stared at him. "Are you trying to blackmail me into helping you?"

Paulie shrugged. "I'm just sayin'."

Actually, Mike Sexton knew that he'd been inside, but it wasn't general knowledge. It was likely no one would even care, but he wasn't sure what the Bellagio would do if they discovered that he was an ex-con. Or the World Poker Tour. He didn't know the rules concerning his situation. But overall it just wasn't good business.

Before he could even respond to the threat, Paulie went one step further. "Or how about your little protégé?"

"What about her?"

"What would she do if she found out you're workin' for her old man?"

Jimmy decided not to play word games with Paulie. "How do you know about that?"

"Hey, I got ears. I know how ta use 'em."

"Paulie—" Jimmy reached across the table for him, but Paulie pulled back and held his hands up.

"Hey, cuz, we ain't gonna get nowhere with that kinda attitude."

"You stay away from that girl," Jimmy warned.

"Jimmy, come on. I ain't interested in your private snatch, okay?"

"It's not like that, Paulie."

"Yeah, I know," Paulie said. "She's the Banker's kid, right?"

Harold Landrigan had been called "the Banker" while he was inside.

"Paulie, what do you think you know?"

"Just enough," Paulie said with a shrug, "enough to cause some . . . uncomfortable moments."

Jimmy had to grit his teeth as he asked, "What do you really want?"

"I tol' you," Paulie said. "Just some intros. I'll do the rest."

Paulie stood up, drained half his beer, and set the glass back down.

"Vegas!" Paulie said. "I love it." He took a deep breath. "You can smell the money." He looked at Jimmy. "Think it over, Jimbo. I'm at Caesar's Palace. I'll be in touch."

THIRTEEN

Jimmy woke the next morning with a headache. It only took a few moments to realize the headache's name was Paulie and no amount of aspirin or Tylenol was going to help. He would have to figure something out, but first he had to make a call.

"Jimmy!" Harold Landrigan said happily, as he came on the line. "How's my little girl doing?"

"She's fine, Harold," Jimmy said. "Still in the hunt after the first day."

"That's my girl."

"On the other hand, I'm pissed."

"Uh-oh," Landrigan said. "At me?"

"At somebody," Jimmy said. "Let's find out if it should be you."

"What's wrong?"

"An old friend of ours showed up in Las Vegas yesterday. Guess who?"

"I can't," Landrigan said. "I assume you mean somebody from prison, and I didn't have any friends there except you."

"I'm flattered," Jimmy said drily. "Remember Paulie DiCicca?"

"DiCicca," Landrigan said. "That little annoying guy?"

"That's him."

"What does he want?"

"He wants me to introduce him to some high rollers."

"So what's the problem?" Landrigan asked. "Introduce him."

"It's not that easy, Harold," Jimmy said. "He's got some kind of scam in mind, and I don't want him undermining my credibility."

"Then don't introduce him," Landrigan said. "I'm still not seeing the problem, Jimmy."

"The problem is he's trying to blackmail me into helping him."

"What's he got on you?"

"On *us,* Harold," Jimmy corrected him. "It's what he's got on us."

"What could he possibly have—" Landrigan started.

"That's right," Jimmy said. "He knows about our little arrangement."

"And he's threatening to tell Kat?"

"He is."

"Well, can't you do something?" Landrigan asked. "I mean . . . have somebody get rid of him?" The man lowered his voice, and Jimmy imagined him touching his finger to his nose.

"You want me to have him whacked, Harold?" Jimmy asked. "Is that what you want me to do? 'Cause I don't do that kind of thing, you know? I'm not a gangster. Didn't you get that when we were in prison?"

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," Landrigan said. "I just thought . . . the reason you were inside . . ."

"I did kill somebody," Jimmy said, "but I didn't whack him. Do you understand the difference? It's called self-defense." Even though the court had called it manslaughter.

"Sure, Jimmy, sure I do. . . . Maybe we can pay him off? I'll send you some money—"

"That's not why I called, Harold," Jimmy said. "I'll figure out how to handle Paulie. If I need more money, I'll let you know."

"Okay, then what can I do?"

"Tell me who you talked to."

"What?"

"There's got to be somebody else you told about our arrangement," Jimmy said. "Somebody else knows. Who did you tell?"

"I didn't tell anyone, Jimmy," Landrigan said. "Honest."

"Harold, you thought this arrangement was very clever," Jimmy said. "It's been my experience that whenever somebody does something clever, he likes to talk about it, brag about it. Who did you brag to? A woman? Another suit at your club?"

"Jimmy, I didn't—" Landrigan stopped short.

"What? Come on, Harold. What'd you just think of?" Jimmy pushed him.

"I'm not sure. . . . Let me look into it."

"You do that, Harold," Jimmy said. "You do what you have to do to find out who Paulie got his information from, and then you plug that leak. I don't want anybody else getting out and hitting me up for a favor. You got it?"

"I've got it, Jimmy."

"And get back to me soon," Jimmy said, "by tonight."

"You got that cell phone I gave you?"

Jimmy made a face. He had it, but he never turned it on.

"I've got it," Jimmy said.

"Can I call you during the game? I mean, how long are you playing? I don't want to interrupt—"

"We play from noon to midnight. I'll call you when I break for dinner."

"Okay," Landrigan said. "Hopefully I'll have this figured out by then."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "hopefully."

Jimmy hung up. He thought Landrigan had it figured out

already. What he probably had to do was figure out a way to tell Jimmy what happened without sounding like a complete idiot.

♠

Though they had met for breakfast the previous morning Jimmy and Kat did not intend to meet for breakfast every day, so when Jimmy went downstairs at 9 A.M. he was on his own. He went to Palio for coffee and a pastry, preferring that to a full breakfast. Paulie was not only giving him a headache but also a sour stomach.

As much as he missed the old Vegas and disliked this new version, he still felt the lure of some of the new casinos. After breakfast he decided to go up the Strip and take a look at a few of the newer ones. He stopped at the New York-New York, the Luxor, and ended up at the Mandalay Bay. He wandered around the casino for a while, watching tourists pour their hard-earned coins into slot machines or trying out foolproof systems at blackjack or roulette. He stayed away from the strange table games that had popped up while he was inside—variations of poker like pai gow, Carribean stud, let it ride, and three-card poker didn't interest him. Red dog, a game he knew from old Vegas, was nowhere to be found. About the only part of classic Vegas he still saw in the casinos was the wheel of fortune. Just put your money down and watch to see if the big wheel stopped on the one-, two-, five-, ten-, twenty-, or forty-dollar slot. He enjoyed the crowds gathered around the table, shouting at the poor sap who was only doing his job by spinning the wheel. Mandalay Bay, being new Vegas, did not have one.

He wandered by the House of Blues and over to the Sports Book, where there was already some action from the East Coast

tracks going on. He stopped at the door to watch the horses on one of the big screens mounted on the walls. All around him were odds posted in neon red figures for horses, ball games, fights, and other sporting events. On one screen there were some greyhounds running on a Florida track. He was about to walk away when he heard his name called. He turned and saw a very familiar face, one that made him smile. The smile slipped, though, when it hit him that the man was in a wheelchair.

"Francisco?" he said.

"Jimmy, my friend."

Francisco Remigio Pareira grabbed Jimmy's hand and crushed it in his. His laugh was as loud as his booming voice and almost left a ringing in Jimmy's ears.

"It is so good to see you," Francisco said.

"And you, Francisco," Jimmy said. He didn't know why it hadn't dawned on him that he'd probably see Francisco in Caesar's. It was the Panamanian's home, after all. It was here Jimmy had last seen Francisco over thirteen years ago, and he swore the man—though always a sharp dresser—was wearing the same suit and the same cologne.

"Don't you usually hold court at Caesar's?"

"Ah, but look at this facility," Francisco said, spreading his arms. "It is beautiful, no? I could not resist relocating."

"I can't say I blame you."

"I have not seen you in Las Vegas in many years, my friend," Francisco said. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've been busy, Francisco," Jimmy said. Behind the man Jimmy could see Francisco's entourage. He always had four or five cronies hovering around him to run errands for him or make bets, as Francisco rarely left his seat in Caesar's—or, rather, the Mandalay Bay—Sports Book.

"Ha! 'I've been busy,' he says." Francisco turned and looked at his friends, who all nodded and laughed as if he'd said something funny or interesting. Whenever Francisco spoke it was in a voice that could only be described as booming. "I, the Great Francisco, have also been busy!"

Francisco's family had money, and he received a regular stipend every year that kept him in gambling funds. The amount of one million dollars had been mentioned many times in reference to Francisco. It was said that was the amount he got each year from home. It was also said that he once bet a million on the World Series, when a million dollars was a million dollars. Jimmy didn't know if either statement was true, but he'd never asked and he never would. You had to take what Francisco said with a grain of salt, but there was no denying the man's charm. Wherever his money came from, or whatever he said, he was a larger-than-life figure in Vegas; and in a town specializing in larger-than-life figures he stood out. He made his bets—good or bad—with supreme confidence, and he was a man with honor. He always paid his debts—eventually.

His dark hair and beard were peppered with gray, and Jimmy put his age at about fifty, but other than that he looked much the same as Jimmy remembered him. Jimmy knew he had been an athlete in his native Panama in his younger years, and even in the wheelchair he looked remarkably fit.

"What are you doing here now?" Francisco asked.

"I'm playing in the WPT tournament."

"Ah, the contest at the Bellagio? That is good. They need talent like you." The big man made a face, shook his head. "So many amateurs these days."

"A lot has changed," Jimmy said, and he found himself staring at the chair.

"Ah, this," Francisco said, bouncing his hands on the arms of the chair. "My own fault. When you make a bet, you must have the money to pay when you lose, eh? Some people have no patience. They did not trust the Great Francisco!" He lowered his voice. "They came in with baseball bats. Oh, the pain."

Jimmy winced. "That's awful luck, Francisco. Something like that should never have happened."

"Ah, forget it!" Francisco said. "Do not be sad, my friend. The Great Francisco is still Francisco, eh?"

"I can see that. So no longer playing poker?"

"I play, my friend, I play," Francisco said, "but in real games—you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

Unlike Jimmy, Francisco was a gambler rather than a poker player. He liked cards, horses, sports, anything he could get a bet down on. He was the ultimate action guy.

"Now if you will excuse me, I must get back to my place in time for the next race, my friend," Francisco said to him, "but it has been so very good seeing you again. Stop by before you leave, eh?"

"I will," Jimmy said, shaking the man's big hand. "I promise. Oh, Francisco, it's been so long I forget. Don't I owe you money?"

"Oh, my friend Jimmy, you have *no* memory. It is the Great Francisco who owes you money. Remember those football bets?"

"Oh yeah," Jimmy said. "I guess I did win those two. What was that, four grand?"

"No, eight thousand dollars. Remember we bet the Super Bowl future bet? You won that, too? But, of course, you had relocated by that time."

Jimmy looked at him. He admired the man's memory and

honor. And it was just like the Great Francisco to know exactly where he'd spent the last years.

Francisco moved closer.

"Unfortunately, my friend, the Great Francisco is a little short right now. He has not had a good season. But you know Francisco is good for it."

"You give it to me when it feels right, Francisco. I trust you."

" 'I've been busy,' " the man quoted again, and returned to his position, shaking his head and laughing loudly. Jimmy could still hear it echoing behind him as he walked across the Mandalay Bay floor.

FOURTEEN

When Jimmy returned to the Bellagio he immediately knew something was wrong. Players were milling about in the poker room, but no one was sitting at their tables. Off to one side the tournament organizers were huddled with men he didn't recognize, though he immediately knew the type.

They were cops.

While Jimmy had no love for cops, he had nothing against them. They had only been doing their job when they arrested him. But that didn't mean he wanted to be around them if he didn't have to.

Whatever had happened it looked as if it was going to hold up the start of day two of the tournament. He tried to locate Kat. He couldn't see her, but did spot Mike Sexton, standing with a man and a woman.

"Hey, Mike," he called, walking over.

Sexton turned and froze. Jimmy knew Sexton still saw him as a murderer. Nevertheless, he was the ambassador of poker. Sexton graciously excused himself and turned to meet Jimmy with a handshake.

"You made it into day two, eh?" Sexton asked.

"I made it," Jimmy said. "What's going on here?"

"They're not saying," Sexton said. "All ah know is that there are a couple of detectives here talkin' to the tournament director about somethin' and it looks serious."

"How serious?"

"We're tryin' to find out. My boss, Steve Lipscomb, is tryin' to get together with them."

"Who's that attractive woman with the two of you?"

"That's Steve's partner, Robyn Moder."

Jimmy looked at his watch. It was eleven forty-five. He started looking around for Paulie. If there was trouble, maybe Paulie DiCicca was part of it. His stomach got queasy again.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee," Jimmy said. "You want anything?"

"No, thanks. Ah'm gonna stick around here and see what's what."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Later."

Sexton gave him a pat on the back and went to rejoin the other two men, one of whom was—presumably—his boss.

Jimmy went to find a house phone and called Kat's room. She didn't answer. She had to be down here somewhere. There was no reason to believe that whatever trouble was brewing had something to do with her, but he got nervous nevertheless. He wondered if this was what it was like to be a father.

He went to Snacks and got a cup of tea rather than coffee, hoping it would settle his stomach. If the detectives were going to get around to questioning everyone at the tournament it could get unpleasant for him. Would they do that? Try to question hundreds of people?

By the time he got back to the poker room it was quarter after twelve. There were even more players now milling about, many of them looking anxious and uncomfortable. He couldn't see Sexton and his boss anywhere. He did, however, spot Kat and rush over to her.

"There you are," she said, grabbing his arm. "What's goin' on? Nobody knows shit."

"Put me in with nobody, then," he said, "because I have no idea."

"I saw cops in the lobby."

"In uniform?"

"Yeah, why?"

"There are also some detectives roaming around here."

"Detectives?" she repeated. "Dude, I hope this doesn't mess up the tournament. We're late gettin' started as it is."

Jimmy continued to scan the room, aware there were uniformed cops on the periphery. He watched as one officer intercepted someone trying to leave the casino floor.

"They're not letting anyone leave," he said. "Something's really wrong."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," he said, "but it's bad."

Suddenly he realized there was something different about her. She was wearing a skirt for the first time since he'd known her. And was that makeup on her face?

"Are you wearing makeup?"

"Dude, fuck off."

♠

At one o'clock the tournament director instructed all players to go to their tables. They were going to begin day two with about two hundred players overall, down to twenty tables.

"Is it over?" Kat asked.

"No," Jimmy said. "They probably figure this is the best way to keep everyone from trying to leave—have us all sit around and start to play."

"Well, that suits me," she said. "I'm goin' to my table. Let's shuffle up and deal."

"Okay," he said. "Good luck, and be careful."

Before he went to his table he wanted to try to talk to Sexton to see if he had found out anything. The tournament director, Jack McClellan, having made his announcement, walked over to the two men who had to be police detectives. He said something to them, and they nodded. One of them looked over at Jimmy—or, at least, Jimmy thought he did. He looked away quickly, then thought how foolish and guilty that must have looked. He'd done his time and wasn't guilty of anything. He looked over at the men again, realized that the detective was simply assessing the crowd.

He decided to go and sit at his table.

♠

It started as a rumor, working its way through the crowd from table to table. Players were free to leave their tables for pit stops, refreshments, or to consult with someone in the gallery, but they were not allowed to leave the general vicinity.

"I heard there was a murder," the man seated next to Jimmy said.

"What?"

He'd introduced himself as Paul Jefferies, one of the amateur players who had made it to day two. He was in his thirties, a businessman from Dallas who had decided to try his luck, as he said, "with the big boys."

He'd just returned from a trip to the men's room when he announced, "Somebody said the cops were investigating a murder."

"One of our players?" someone at the table asked.

"I don't know," Jefferies said. "I didn't get much information."

Most of the players at the table were locked into the game and didn't comment.

"No point discussing rumors," Jimmy said, "but if any of you would like to do that and allow it to take your mind off your game, be my guest." Chris Ferguson gave him a look and a nod of approval. Jimmy'd said it with a smile, all part of his patter. While he was wondering what the hell was going on, he wasn't about to let it tarnish his game.

Several players at the table were having a hard time concentrating, not playing with the same vigor they had the night before. Jimmy, Ferguson, and a new face and star of the WPT, Lee Watkinson, were the most focused at the table, giving their concentration to the game. That was one of the things Jimmy had learned when he was inside: how to push everything else to the back of his mind, focusing only on the cards.

Losing concentration at the poker table could cost you money—lots of it.

Losing it in prison could cost you your life.

FIFTEEN

By the time they broke for dinner at 7 P.M. the rumor had taken root. Jimmy overheard two people in the restaurant at the table next to his talking about a murder in the hotel, and they were not involved with the tournament.

He'd decided to try the Picasso restaurant this time rather than go back to Prime again. He had not seen Sabine Chevalier since they'd had dinner together the night before, and he wondered if she'd even made it to the second day.

"What have you heard about the murder?" he asked the waitress when she brought him his check.

"Not much," she said. "I only came on about an hour ago."

He nodded, paid the bill, and left. When he got back to the casino floor, he saw Mike Sexton walking ahead of him. He speeded up enough to come alongside him.

"Hey, Mike."

Sexton looked at him, startled.

"Oh, hey, Jimmy."

"What have you heard?"

"About what?"

Jimmy grabbed Sexton's arm. "Don't play dumb with me, Mike. You know what I'm talking about. You're a broadcast journalist now. There's no way you don't know what's going on."

Sexton looked at Jimmy, then glanced around for something. Finally, he led Jimmy into an empty aisle of nickel slots.

"Okay," he said, "but you didn't hear it from me."

"You got it."

Sexton hesitated and then said, "Okay, there may have been a murder in the hotel."

"That much I know," Jimmy said. "It's all over the place."

"Yeah, well, this you don't know," Sexton said. "The victim is one of the players."

"Jesus! Who?"

"You didn't hear this from me, right?"

"I swear, Mike," Jimmy said. "Who was it?"

"Tim Bennett," Sexton said. "He's one of the Internet crowd, runs with a group that call themselves the posse."

"I've met him," Jimmy said. "Just saw him yesterday."

"Yeah, he won a bracelet last year in his first World Series event."

"How did it happen?" Jimmy asked. "Where?"

"I only know this because mah boss got the detectives to talk to us," Sexton said. "It happened sometime during the night." He leaned close and lowered his voice. "His neck was broken."

"What?"

"Yeah," Sexton said, nodding, "in his room. They found him on one of those portable massage tables."

"Who the hell would—?"

"They think he was with a woman at some point during the night," Sexton said.

"How do they figure that?"

"Ah don't know," Sexton said. "Apparently there's some kind of evidence that leads them to believe that."

"Could a woman have done that to him?"

"Who knows?" Sexton said. "Maybe she let the murderer in. Or maybe she actually was a masseuse. They're pretty strong."

"What are they going to do?"

"Keep everybody around, interview all of 'em."

"That's a lot of interviews," Jimmy said. "They were smart to let the game continue. Keeps everyone here for now. What are they going to do tonight when the game breaks up, though? And what about the players who were eliminated yesterday?"

"I don't know," Sexton said. "They're not lettin' us in on their plans. I'm just glad it's their problem."

"They'll probably talk to his friends first," Jimmy said, "and anybody who's been seen with him."

"Maybe they'll solve it before they have to talk to all two hundred plus players."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, his mind racing, "maybe."

"I've got to go, Jimmy," Sexton said.

"Okay, Mike. Thanks for the info."

"What info? Ah didn't give you anythin'."

"Right," Jimmy said. "Nothing."

Sexton took off, leaving Jimmy with the nickel slots and his thoughts.

Jimmy decided the murder would best be a curiosity pursued in his spare time, not allowed to interfere with his poker game. The police probably wouldn't even get around to questioning him. If they were going to interview all the participants in the tournament, they might as well try to talk to everyone in the casino. The logistics of the whole thing were just too unwieldy. Besides, if they found evidence that a woman did it, they'd be questioning women.

With any luck he wouldn't be involved at all.

♠

His noninvolvement lasted all of two hours. It was just after nine, and he was riding a hot streak when the tournament director tapped him on the shoulder.

"Mr. Spain?"

"What is it?"

"Would you come with me please, sir?"

Jimmy looked up at the director, who was wearing a sour expression.

"Am I being given a time-out?" he asked. "Look, all I said was I didn't think this fella here— What's your name, again?"

The man he had been tormenting for the past two hours, completely psyching out of his game, was about to answer when the director said, "No, sir, it's the, uh, police."

"Police?"

"Yes, sir."

Jimmy looked around, saw two men he assumed were detectives standing at the edge of the playing floor.

"The police want me?"

"Yes, sir," the director said. "They'd like to ask you a few questions."

Jimmy looked at the stack of chips in front of him, which was about forty-five thousand dollars. "I'm kinda hot here," he complained.

"I understand, Mr. Spain," the director said, "but the police are sort of in charge at the moment. Don't worry. You won't be blinded off."

Jimmy looked around the table. The other players certainly did not look disappointed at the prospect of his streak being interrupted.

"Save my seat, guys," he said unnecessarily as he stood up. "I won't be gone long."

As he followed the director, he heard someone say, "I hope he never comes back."

He didn't turn around to see who it was.

♠

"I'm Detective Cooper," the black man said, "and this is my partner, Detective Devine. We're with the Las Vegas P.D. Homicide Squad."

"Devine?" Jimmy asked, realizing immediately it was the wrong thing to say.

"Yeah, what about it?" Devine asked pugnaciously. The man's clear blue eyes bored into Jimmy from beneath bushy white eyebrows. He'd probably been getting shit about his name for twenty years or more on the job.

"Nothing," Jimmy said. "I didn't mean anything by it. It's just, you know, an unusual name." Great, he thought, now he's pissed at me.

He looked at the other detective, the younger, calmer one.

"And your name is James Spain?" Detective Cooper asked.

"Jimmy," he answered. "I go by Jimmy."

"All right, Mr. Spain," Cooper said. "As you may or may not know we're investigating a possible homicide that took place here in the casino hotel."

"I . . . might have heard something about it," Jimmy admitted. "What's it got to do with me?"

"What makes you think it's got anything to do with you?" Devine demanded.

"You're standing here talking to me," Jimmy said. "You pulled

me out of the game—at a time, I might add, when I was getting pretty hot."

"Is that a fact?" Devine asked. "Are we botherin' you?"

"No," Jimmy said, "no, I didn't mean you were— Look, what's this about?"

"Sir," Cooper said, giving his partner what looked like a legitimately annoyed look, "do you know a woman named Sabine Chevalier?"

"Yes, I do," Jimmy said. "She's a player in the tournament."

"Is that all she is?" Devine asked. "Fine lookin' woman like that? You wouldn't be hittin' that, would you, Spain?"

"Is that what she— Look, okay, I know the woman casually, that's all."

"And do you know a girl named Kat Landrigan?"

That stopped Jimmy cold. Why were they asking about Kat?

"Yes, I do," he said. "Is she all right?"

"Oh, she's fine," Devine said. "She just might have helped kill a guy last night, that's all."

"Andy," Cooper said, glaring.

Jimmy bit his lip. He almost said, *Andy* Devine? The man glared at him, as if daring him to say something.

"Look, Mr. Spain," Cooper said, "if you know these two women we'd like you to come with us to answer a few more questions."

"Come with you where?"

"Just to a room in the hotel we're using."

At least they weren't taking him to their precinct, or whatever they called it here in Vegas.

"Sure," Jimmy said. "Why not? I'd like to cooperate any way I can."

"That's real good, pal," Devine said. "That makes us very happy."

As they began to walk away from the tournament director and the playing floor, Jimmy asked, "Can you tell me why you picked me out specifically?"

"Sure," Devine said. "Both of your girlfriends gave you up."

"Gave me up?"

"What my partner means, Mr. Spain," Cooper said, "is that both of these women said they were with you last night at the time of the murder."

"With . . . me? Both of them?"

"That's right, stud," Devine said. "Must've been some party."

"They don't claim to have been with you together," Cooper said, his tone betraying his exasperation with his partner. Jimmy didn't get a good cop–bad cop feel from the pair. He got the feeling they didn't work well together. "Not, like, in a threesome or anything."

"So what are they claiming?"

"They're both using you as an alibi, sir," Cooper said. "You can understand how that would make us a little . . . curious."

SIXTEEN

Jimmy thought they were going to take him to a floor of hotel rooms, but instead they took him down a hall to some offices. There were two other offices with closed doors, a uniformed cop standing in front of each.

"Excuse me a minute," Cooper said. He walked over to speak with the men, leaving Jimmy with Detective Devine.

"Hey, look," Jimmy said, trying to make peace, "we got off on the wrong foot—"

"I know what foot we got off on, Spain," Devine snapped back. "You professional poker players make me sick. You sit and play games while us working stiffs sweat for a living."

At least Jimmy knew now that there was a lot more behind Devine's attitude than any personal enmity toward him. He could live with that.

"Okay . . ." he said.

Cooper came back and asked Jimmy, "Would you step in here with us, please?"

"Detective," he said, "your partner seems to have a hard on for poker players. Don't you think we'd get more accomplished if you and I talked alone?"

"Hey, listen, you son of a—"

"He's right, Andy."

"What?" Devine looked apoplectic.

"I'll talk with Mr. Spain alone."

"Listen, Cooper, I got more time on the job than you—"

"That may be," Cooper said, "but I'm the primary on this case. We'll do it my way. Mr. Spain?"

Spain preceded him into an office furnished with two desks, desk chairs, and some file cabinets. Cooper closed the door behind them, leaving Devine out in the hall.

"Why do I get the feeling you guys aren't exactly good cop–bad cop material."

"Andy's not a bad guy— Well, okay, he is, actually," Cooper said. "But don't worry about him, Mr. Spain. All you have to do is answer my questions, and you and I will get along fine."

"Happy to hear it."

"And the quicker we get this done, the quicker you can get back to your game."

"I like the sound of that."

"Have a seat."

Jimmy looked around and chose an ergonomic chair.

"All right, then," Cooper said. "Suppose you tell me your relationship with Sabine Chevalier."

"I hardly know her," Jimmy said. "We met a couple of nights ago, had dinner last night . . . and that's it."

Cooper consulted a small spiral notebook he took from his shirt pocket. He shrugged his shoulders to make his sports jacket sit right again, but there was no need. Not only was he the younger, calmer detective but the better dressed as well. It was obvious he did not buy off the rack, as his partner did.

"She said you had dinner in the evening, then went back to the game."

"That's right."

"Then she says you called her and asked her to come to your room after the game."

"And she said she came up?"

"Yes."

"Just because I called her?"

"That's what she said."

"Wow," Jimmy said, "I wish I had that power over women, don't you?"

"My wife wouldn't let me."

"Well, I just don't, Detective," Jimmy said. He'd already decided he didn't know Sabine Chevalier well enough to lie for her. And now not backing her alibi, he figured he never would get to know her any better. But it was foolish of her to think he'd lie.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I never called her to ask her to come to my room," Jimmy said. "She wasn't there."

"So you're saying you're not her alibi for last night."

"That's what I'm saying—but for what it's worth, I don't think she has it in her to kill anyone. . . . How was he killed?"

"Apparently," Cooper said, "somebody broke his neck."

"I especially don't see her killing someone that way," Jimmy said. "I mean . . . she's a woman."

"Women kill, Mr. Spain," Cooper said, "especially men."

"We probably give them good reason to."

"My wife would agree with you," Cooper said. "What about this Kat Landrigan?"

"What about her?"

"Can you alibi her?" the detective asked. "Was she in your room last night?"

"Yes," Jimmy lied.

"Doing what . . . if you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind you asking," Jimmy said, "because you're not doing it while your partner leers at me."

"He's not really my— Go on."

"Kat is my—what should I call it—protégé? Trainee? Student?"

"They all fit," he said. "She claims you're her teacher."

"Yes, I am."

"And you're teaching her . . . poker?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And that's what you were doing last night?"

"The first day broke up at midnight," Jimmy said, hoping he was telling the detective what Kat told him. "We came up here to go over the day's play, hand by hand."

"You can remember that?" Cooper asked. "I mean . . . every hand?"

"Any poker player worth anything can remember every hand, Detective," Jimmy said. "It's the only way we don't make the same mistake twice."

"Are you a regular on the circuit, Mr. Spain? Is that what they call it? The circuit?"

Jimmy nodded. Now he had to see if he could get by without mentioning that he was an ex-con. "I used to be."

"What happened?"

"Burn out," Jimmy said. "I took some time off. But lately I've been playing in the poker rooms and casinos in California. A few tournaments leading up to this one."

"And the girl?"

"We live in the same building. When we met, and when she found out I was a professional poker player, she asked me to tutor her."

"And you said yes?"

"Not right away," Jimmy said. "She had to convince me."

"How did she do that?"

Jimmy was amazed. The same question coming from Detective Devine would have sounded suggestive.

"With her talent."

"She's that good? To play with these pros, I mean? She seems too young for that."

"Well," Jimmy said, "that's what we're here to find out."

"And you're a professional?" Cooper asked. "I mean, you don't do anything else for work? Just gamble?"

"You could say that. My main game is poker, pure and simple. Anything else is just fooling around."

"You must be pretty good if you can make a living at it."

"Do you play poker, Detective?"

"Some," Cooper admitted. "We have a game once a month, some of my, uh, friends and colleagues."

"And are you any good?"

"I win more than I lose."

"Do you play Texas hold 'em?"

"No," Cooper said, "mostly we play stud. I don't know much about hold 'em—which reminds me."

He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a plastic ziplock bag. Inside the clear bag were three playing cards.

"Can you tell me what these are?"

"May I?"

Cooper handed him the bag. Inside was a jack of spades, a queen of hearts, and a king of clubs. Since that much was obvious, Jimmy wasn't sure what the detective wanted to know.

"I mean, I know what they are," Cooper said, as if reading Jimmy's mind. "I know what cards they are, but do they represent anything?"

"Well, not these three specific cards," Jimmy said, "but in hold 'em any combination of picture cards is what we call a Picasso flop."

"Okay, I know what a flop is," Cooper said. "I learned that from television. The first three cards dealt out on the table, right?"

"Right," Jimmy said, "and many card combinations have nicknames. For instance, if a pair of fives land on the flop we call that the speed limit."

"For fifty-five miles an hour."

"Right. A pair of eights would be snowmen."

"I see," Cooper said. "And this is a Picasso flop."

"Yes," Jimmy said, "for the painter Pablo Picasso?"

"I know who Picasso was, Mr. Spain."

"Sorry," Jimmy said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"No offense taken." Cooper put his hand out and Jimmy returned the bag with the Picasso flop in it.

"So these cards have no specific meaning beyond that," Cooper said.

"That's right."

"Well," Cooper said, "I appreciate your help."

"I'm afraid I didn't help Miss Chevalier very much," Jimmy said. "Are you, uh, holding them both?"

"Yes," Cooper said, "in separate rooms down the hall."

"And you are fairly certain that a woman is the killer?" Jimmy asked.

"There are some indications that a woman was with the deceased last night. That's all we're saying."

"Am I allowed to ask the deceased's name?"

"Sure," Cooper said. "It's gonna get out, anyway. His name is Tim Bennett."

"Bennett?"

"Did you know him?"

"I came pretty close last night, but officially, no."

"Okay, then. We're done with you, Mr. Spain. You're free to go."

"What about Kat?" Jimmy asked, standing up.

"We'll be releasing her in a little while. We just have a few more questions for her."

"Can I be present?"

Cooper was about to open the office door and stopped.

"Why would you want to be?"

"I feel responsible for her."

"Are you a lawyer?"

"No," Jimmy said, "we went through that already. I'm a poker player. Does she need a lawyer?"

"Not at the moment."

Jimmy waited. Cooper didn't open the door, but neither did he speak.

"So?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't think it would be a good idea for you to be there," the detective said finally, "but you can wait for her, if you want, in the hall."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Thanks."

"And try not to let Devine get to you."

"Does he get to you?"

"Every day."

As Cooper finally opened the door, Jimmy asked, "The cards in the plastic bag? You mind if I ask why they're in a bag?"

"They're evidence, Mr. Spain," Cooper said. "This particular Picasso flop was found in the breast pocket of the dead man's bathrobe."

SEVENTEEN

Jimmy stood in the hall while Cooper walked over to Detective Devine and the two uniformed cops. Apparently he'd been able to match Kat's story, effectively giving her an alibi for whenever Bennett was killed. Now what he had to find out was why she'd lied to the police.

And the same went for Sabine Chevalier. As pissed off as she was undoubtedly going to be, he was more pissed that she had tried to drag him into this. He didn't need trouble with the police. Luckily, the way it looked now he was not necessarily a person of interest in this case, as both Kat and Sabine seemed to be. That meant there was a good chance Cooper wasn't going to check him out and come up with his record. But why did she lie in the first place? Had she killed Bennett?

As he was trying to sort it all out, a door opened down the hall and Sabine came out. He braced himself for what was to come as she approached him. He needn't have bothered. She walked past him without a word. He was so surprised he turned and watched her walk. In fact, he was so intent on watching her that he didn't hear Detective Devine sidle up next to him.

"That is some high-class piece of ass," the detective said. "You sure you ain't tappin' that?"

Jimmy looked at the man. "If I was, I'd tell you, Detective," he said, "if only to rub it in."

"Yeah . . ." Devine said, "smart guy. What are you still doin' here, Spain? We're done with you."

"I'm waiting for Kat."

"Ah." Devine's eyes widened. "Maybe you like 'em young, huh? And scrawny? She's a little too skinny for my taste, but I can see where—"

"Don't even go there, Devine," Jimmy said heatedly.

"Ooh," Devine said. "Did I touch a nerve?"

"Yeah, you did, and if you keep touching it, you might have to run me in for assaulting a cop."

Devine was older than Jimmy and out of shape. He tried sucking in his belly and drawing himself up to his full height, but he still fell four or five inches short.

"Yeah, I'm shakin'," he said.

"Detective?" one of the cops called from down the hall.

"Yeah?" Devine said without turning his head.

"Your partner wants you."

"I'm comin'." He pointed a stubby finger at Jimmy. "I'm gonna be watchin' you, smart guy."

"Thanks for the warning."

Jimmy watched the portly detective walk back up the hall and mentally kicked himself. He knew it was only a matter of time before they ran his name through the system, but antagonizing Devine would only make it happen that much sooner.

He turned and looked back down the hall in the direction Sabine Chevalier had gone. There was another question nagging at him. If they knew that she'd lied about him being her alibi, why had they let her walk?

It was another fifteen minutes before Kat came out of one of the offices. She saw Jimmy and rushed to him.

"Oh my God, dude," she said, grabbing his lapel and hang-

ing on. "Thank you so much for backin' up my story. You're the nuts." He could feel that she was trembling. She kept her voice down.

"Come on," he told her, putting his arm around her, "let's get out of here."

He hustled her back to the casino floor, where she said, "We have to get back in the game."

"That can wait a few minutes. They're not blinding us off." He pulled her to the side. "Talk to me, Kat. What's going on? Why did you lie to the cops?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "They started asking me, like, where was I and what was my relationship with the dead guy. I panicked. I tried a bluff."

"Why?"

"Because I've never been questioned by the cops before."

"I thought these days all kids your age had dealt with the cops before."

"Well, not me," she said, "and not about a murder. I was scared shitless!"

"Scared enough to call your father?"

"I hope I never get that scared," she said, "but scared enough that I wished I smoked. So I ran a stone bluff and lied."

"Kat," Jimmy said, "what the hell is going on? Was there anything between Tim Bennett and you?"

"Eeeouw," she said, making a face. "You saw what happened last night. The guy was a geek, Jimmy."

"Then why did they bring you in for questioning?" he asked her pointedly.

"From the way it sounds, they think a woman killed him."

"The detective told me they had some evidence that a woman

was in the room with him," Jimmy said. "Not necessarily that a woman actually killed him."

"Well, they were treatin' me like they thought I did it."

"Why?"

"Listen, a lot of people saw that confrontation last night. We were getting pretty loud. I told him off."

"That's a motive for him to kill you," Jimmy said, "not the other way around."

"I know that," she said. "That's what I told them, but did they listen to me? No. They kept askin' me, like, did I want to be in the posse? Geez, like, why would I? That'd be worse than going broke."

"Calm down, Kat. Take a deep breath."

She did as she was told.

"Now, who told them?" Jimmy asked. "Maybe it's somebody trying to divert their attention away from herself."

"They wouldn't tell me who it was," she complained. "They wouldn't tell me anything, dude. But the good news is, I think they were questioning somebody else at the same time. I could hear voices through the wall from another office."

"I know," Jimmy said. "I saw her. It was Sabine Chevalier."

"I hope she had an alibi."

"She didn't," Jimmy said.

"How do you know?"

"Because she told them she was with me."

"What? But I told them—" She stopped short. "Was she with you?"

"No. Neither one of you was," he said, "but I backed your story and not hers. Which means I lied to the cops, so is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"No," she said. "I only lied because I was scared, and I figured

you'd back me up because you know I didn't kill him . . . don't you?"

"Of course I know that, Kat," he said, "but in the future remember that it's never a good idea to lie to the cops. And it's definitely not a good idea to put me in a position to have to lie to them. Got it?"

"I got it, I got it," she said. "I just hope the opportunity never comes up again," she added fervently.

"So do I."

♠

Jimmy was sorry he'd allowed Sabine Chevalier to walk past him without stopping her. He wanted to know why she lied about being with him. He also wanted to know why the cops let her go after they caught her in a lie. But the task at hand was still the tournament, so he and Kat went right back to it.

Some of the other players at the table weren't overjoyed to see him. The fortunes of some of them seemed to have changed in his absence. He decided to stop thinking about alibis and murder and see if he could get his momentum back.

He couldn't.

The cards didn't run his way the rest of the night. He managed to stay out of harm's way and not lose a significant amount of chips, so that by the time the second day ended he was still ahead with about thirty-five thousand. That was less than the average of the ninety-nine players that were making it to day three.

As the players prepared their chips to be packaged away for the night, he looked around to see if he could locate Sabine. He

couldn't find her, but he did see Kat coming toward him, and she didn't look happy.

"I blew it," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"After I got back to the table I just couldn't concentrate. I lost more than half my chips. I'm down to twelve grand."

"At least you're not out. You're short stacked, but the blinds still aren't that big. You have a chance to come back," Jimmy said. "Just start fresh tomorrow."

"What if there is no tomorrow for me?" she asked. "What if those detectives decide I killed Bennett and they arrest me? Not only will I go to jail, I'll be blinded off."

"That won't happen."

"Why not?"

"Because you didn't kill him."

"You don't think innocent people ever get arrested and go to jail for somethin' they didn't do? Keep bluffin'."

"Oh, no," he said. "Believe me, I know that happens. It's just not going to happen to you."

"What are you gonna do?" she asked. "Find the real killer?"

"I'd probably have as good a chance of doing that as those two detectives," he said. "I ever tell you my father was a cop?"

"You mentioned it, dude," she said. "You don't talk about it much though."

"That's because he was disappointed in me," he said. "Most of the men in my family were cops. My father was a detective, and he was much better at it than these two guys—especially Devine."

She shuddered and hugged her arms. "He's creepy."

"Yeah, he is." He put his arm around her. "Come on, I'll buy you a nightcap."

"A nightcap?"

"Yeah," he said. "You're going right to bed. No casino hopping tonight."

"Dude, I don't feel much like casino hopping."

♠

They stopped in the Baccarat Bar, one of the Bellagio's twenty-four-hour spots. Jimmy got them each a champagne cocktail.

"What are we celebratin'?" she asked.

"You made it through two days of this tournament, kid," he said. "That's an accomplishment."

"I owe it to you, Jimmy," she said. "If it wasn't for those detectives I'd be doin' even better, but I guess you're right. It is somethin' to celebrate."

They sipped their drinks, and Jimmy looked around. At that moment he didn't see anyone he recognized.

"Kat, tell me about the posse."

"Those guys? Why?"

"By tomorrow everyone is going to know that Bennett is dead. Was he their leader?"

"I guess you could say so. He's the one who got most of the attention."

"How did the other guys feel about that?"

"I don't know, Jimmy. I don't know any of them."

"How about from TV?"

"Like I said, Bennett got most of the attention," she said. "The other guys are still tryin'."

"So maybe one of them wanted to get rid of him so he'd have a better shot at being number one."

"Dude, Bennett was far from number one, but I know what you mean. Maybe one of them was, like, jealous."

"Yeah, maybe."

"What are you gonna do, Jimmy?" she asked. "Are you really gonna try to find the killer?"

"I think maybe I'll just ask some questions," he said. "See what I can find out."

"You'd do that for me?"

"For you. Naw. This is for me. I put a lot of time into getting you ready for this tournament. You think I want to see those cops mess it up?"

"Right," she said. "I'd give you a kiss, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I feel kinda funny."

"About what?"

"When I told those detectives I was with you? I told 'em we were discussing the game, ya know? But I think they thought we were doin' somethin' else."

He stared at her for a long moment, then scrunched up his face and said, "Eeeouw!"

"I know!" she said.

♠

Jimmy was in his room, waiting for sleep to come to him when the stupid cell phone rang.

"Jimmy, listen, I waited but you never called. I tried and tried to find out who leaked it to Paulie about our deal but—"

"Harold, Harold, Harold, listen," Jimmy said, finally getting the millionaire to quiet down, "there's some other stuff going on

here, so I need you to just chill for a while." Great, now he was talking like Kat.

"What do you mean? What's going on? Is Kat okay?"

"She's fine, Harold," Jimmy assured him. "Sailed through day two."

"Well, what's this other stuff—"

"I'll be in touch, Harold," Jimmy said, suddenly fatigued. "I made it through also, and I need to get some sleep."

"Jimmy—"

Jimmy broke the connection, turned off the phone, and settled down on the bed.

EIGHTEEN

By morning almost everyone connected with the tournament knew that Tim Bennett had been murdered. After a sleepless night Jimmy had decided to talk to the other members of the posse before play started for the day. He was up and dressed by eight-thirty and getting ready to go downstairs for breakfast when there was a knock on his door. He expected the two detectives to be standing in the hall when he pulled the door open but instead saw his friend Mike Sexton.

"Morning, Mike."

"Jimmy," Sexton said. "May I come in for a minute?"

"I was just going to get some breakfast. Do you want to join me?"

"I think we should talk here."

"Okay, then," Jimmy said. "Come on in."

He backed away from the door, allowed Sexton to slide past him, then closed it.

"What's on your mind, Mike?"

"This murder," Sexton said, "it's bad. Bad for the Bellagio, bad for the WPT, bad for the tournament."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "we've pretty much established that it's bad. Why come to me?"

Sexton looked around, trying to decide where to sit. Members of the tournament usually got a discount rate from the ho-

tels where they played, but since Jimmy wasn't footing his own bill he had upgraded to a suite.

"This is pretty nice."

"Yeah, it is. What's up, Mike?" Had they sent Sexton up to ask Jimmy to leave the tournament? And if so, why?

Sexton finally decided to sit in the room's easy chair. He settled into it heavily.

"Jimmy, the WPT and hotel need somebody to look into this."

"And by 'this' you mean the murder? You've got the police for that."

"They want you."

"Me? Why me? I'm no detective. Why would they even think of me?"

"Well . . ." Sexton said sheepishly, "um, they didn't think of you. I did."

Jimmy pulled the chair out from the desk and sat in it, facing Sexton.

"Why would you think of me for this, Mike?"

"Well, for one thing you've got . . . experience that no one else has."

"I've been to prison," Jimmy said. "If that's experience that anybody you know wants, I'll trade with him."

"No, not that," Sexton said, "although I don't think that'd hurt. But didn't you tell me once your father was a cop in Philadelphia?"

"He was," Jimmy said. "In fact, he was a detective, but that's not the sort of thing that's hereditary, Mike. It takes training."

"All I'm sayin'—all I said to the director of the tournament and my boss—was that you have knowledge the average layman doesn't."

"Then why don't they hire a detective?"

"They want this done discreetly," Sexton said, "by someone who blends in. You blend in."

"I've been off the circuit a long time, Mike," Jimmy said. "Most of these people don't even know who I am."

"The pros do," Sexton said. "A lot of them have heard of you; some of them know you. You're here, you're playin'"—Sexton spread his hands apart—"you blend in."

"That logic is faulty somewhere," Jimmy said. "Give me a minute."

"All they want is someone who will ask questions, keep his ears and eyes open, somebody who's not with the police."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Suppose I agree to do this. What's in it for me?"

"You can do it for the good of the tournament or the game," Sexton said, "or we can work some kind of fee schedule. Or, better yet"—his eyes lit up as this obviously just occurred to him—"who says you couldn't be in the final six of one of our WPT 'Bad Boy' episodes? You'd be perfect."

Spain wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult, but he knew one thing: it meant big money.

And, Jimmy was already toying with the idea of doing some snooping around, and it wasn't for the good of the game. It was to make sure Kat didn't get jammed up for this. It was also to keep himself out of trouble, if he could. What would happen, though, if the cops found out he was nosing around?

"Did you tell them that I did time?" Jimmy asked.

Sexton hesitated, then said, "I told my boss, and that's all. But I told him about your father, too."

Okay, word was going to get out that he'd been in prison. All he really needed to do was keep Kat from finding out about him

and her dad. If she heard that he'd been inside, she didn't necessarily have to know where.

"Jimmy," Sexton said, "I gotta tell you, you're not the only guy in this tournament—or on the circuit—who's done time. It's not a big deal."

Jimmy thought awhile. This was certainly not the way he had expected to come back into the circuit, but could it hurt to have these men indebted to him?

"All right."

"You'll do it?"

"I'll see what I can do, Mike," Jimmy said. "I can't make any promises."

Sexton stood up.

"They'd really like it if the killer turned out to be someone from Bennett's private life," he said, "and not the poker world. I mean, he pisses—he pissed—a lot of people off with his attitude."

"I can't control who the killer will turn out to be," Jimmy said. "And I still think the case will be solved by the cops."

"Whatever," Sexton said, "as long as I can tell my boss you're in."

"You can tell him exactly what I said," Jimmy replied. "I'll do what I can."

"I'll tell him." Sexton grabbed Jimmy's hand. "I appreciate this, Jimmy."

"Tell me something, Mike," Jimmy asked. "How much trouble would you have been in if I'd said no?"

"I didn't look before I leaped," Sexton said. "I admit it. Before I knew it, I was sayin' I knew somebody who could help. How much trouble would I be in? I really don't know. I'm just glad you said yes—uh, you said that you'd do what you can."

"Right."

"You sure you didn't kill that guy on purpose? That would guarantee you the 'Bad Boy' show," Sexton kidded.

"No."

"Well, you're still gettin' mah vote."

Jimmy opened the door for Sexton and ushered him out. Then he went to the phone to call Kat and have her meet him in Palio for breakfast.

♠

"You told them you'd do what?" she asked. "You're not a detective, dude."

"I know it," Jimmy said. "That's what I told Mike. But I was going to talk to the other posse members anyway. I need you to give me their names right now."

"Let me think," she said. "They usually cover that when they televise these tournaments."

Jimmy took a hotel pad and pen from his pocket. He slid them across the table to her. She moved her decimated fruit plate off to the side. Kat didn't eat meat or anything she thought was impure—or so she said. Jimmy had seen her destroy a cheeseburger when the urge hit. Today, however, she was nutrition conscious.

She wrote a name, thought a moment, wrote another, and then a third, all with the tip of her tongue sticking out.

"There, the spellin' may not be right. That's either all of them or all I can remember."

"Okay." He poured himself some more coffee from the carafe on the table. Kat reached over and captured the cinnamon bun crumbs that were left on his plate with a damp forefinger.

"Are you gonna talk to her, too?"

"Who her?"

"Sabine Chevalier," she said. "The woman who used sex with you as an alibi."

"How do you know she told them we were having sex?" Jimmy asked. "Maybe she told them we were playing cards."

"Ha!"

"That's what you told them."

"You're too old for me to have sex with," she said, "but not her. She's gotta be—what—forty?"

"She can't be a day over thirty-two."

Kat made a face. "Still old."

"God, sometimes I forget how young you really are, girl."

"Dude," she said, "what's playin' detective gonna do to your game? You not playin' your cards right."

"I don't know," he said. "I'll have to cut my brain in half."

"How are you gonna do that?"

"I don't have a clue."

"Dude, you're playin' a one outer. Fold now while you have the chance."

"Too late—and, damn, what'd I say about that poker lingo?"

NINETEEN

When they left Palio, Kat said she was going to play some quarter slots to calm her nerves. Jimmy said he'd see her at the game. Armed with the names she had given him, he went to see if he could locate the other posse members. Coincidentally he ran into someone else he wanted to talk to.

He was entering the elevator court when an elevator opened and Sabine Chevalier stepped out. They both stopped short.

"I guess you want to talk to me, *oui*?" she said after a few seconds.

"Why would I want to talk to you?" he asked. "All you did was throw me to the cops. Why would you think I'd support your alibi, Sabine?"

She shrugged. "I thought you were a gentleman."

"That's funny," he said. "In the past when I've lied about having sex with a woman she's been upset."

"Just a—how do you say?—little white lie."

Her makeup was impeccable, her complexion clear and smooth, her expression serene and beautiful. She didn't look like a woman who would slide a blade into a man, but Jimmy had known a lot of violent men who didn't look like criminals.

She also didn't look like a woman who was worried that her alibi had fallen apart.

"I'm curious," he said. "Why'd they let you walk after I blew your story?"

"They have no evidence to arrest me on," she said. "For now, all they have are suspicions."

Jimmy had to move aside as another elevator opened and several people got out.

"Can we go somewhere and talk about this?" he asked.

"What is there to talk about?" she asked. "I am not mad at you."

"*You're* not mad at *me*?" he asked.

"Oh, come, come," she said. "I saw the way those detectives were looking at me. If you had lied, you would have been the man to them. And you want to be the man, Jimmy, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"It's funny, but I usually prefer having done the work before I get the credit."

"And you think sleeping with me would have been work?" she asked with a smile.

"I think we should go someplace and talk," he said, as they had to move aside again to allow more people to leave an elevator.

"I really do not think we have anything to talk about, Jimmy."

"Oh no? How about whether or not you killed Tim Bennett?"

"I did not," she said. "End of conversation."

"Then why did you lie about being with me?"

"Look," she said, starting to get annoyed, "I will apologize to you for that, okay? But I do not want to talk about this."

"I don't either," he said, "at least, not in an elevator court."

She glared at him.

"You are not going let this drop, are you?"

"No."

She took a deep breath and said, "Oh, all right. I was on my way to the Pool Café. Come with me, if you wish."

"Lead the way."

"I like being outside," Sabine said as they sat down beneath an umbrella. "I do not get to sit in the sun much."

He didn't comment on the fact that she wasn't sitting in the sun now. It was a beautiful spot, however, overlooking not only the pool but also the Bellagio courtyards.

A waitress came and took their order. Just coffee for him; coffee, a chocolate croissant, and assorted cheeses for her.

"I watch what I eat when I am home," she said, when she had the croissant in her hand, "not when I am away."

"So what was your relationship with Bennett?" Jimmy asked.

"That creep?" She made a disgusted face. "I did not have a relationship with him."

"Okay, what was your connection?"

"*Phiff!* I did not have one."

"Then why do the cops think you killed him?"

"They do not think I killed— Look, they are only partially sure that a woman did it. They are talking to a lot of the women players."

"Well," Jimmy said, "none of them claimed they were sleeping with me at the time. Why did you?"

"The truth?"

"That would be refreshing."

"I panicked," she said, echoing Kat's reason. "I thought if I told them I was in bed with someone, they would believe it. Then I tried to think of who I would want to be in bed with."

"And you came up with me."

"Oui."

"I'm flattered," he said, "but could it simply be that we'd

had dinner the night before and I was the first one to come to mind?"

"That could be, I guess."

"Less flattering," he said, "but more probable."

"Honestly," she said, "most men would be flattered and *not* try to reason it away."

"Believe me," he said, "I often wish I was like most men. It would save me a lot of time and trouble to just go along, fat, dumb, and happy."

"Well," she said, "not so fat."

"Thanks."

"Look, Jimmy," she said, "I admit I lied and it was foolish—and I am sorry if I inconvenienced you—but I did not kill Tim Bennett."

"If you didn't, then who do you think did?"

"Take your pick," she said. "When Tim came on the scene he was obnoxious. After he won a bracelet, he was even worse."

"What about his buddies?"

"His posse? Why would any of them kill him? He was the star of the group, getting them all their attention."

"Jealousy?"

"Without him no one would know who the hell they are," she said. "Does not sound like a motive for murder to me." She leaned forward and asked, "Are we playing detective? Am I your—how do you say it—moll?"

"That's what you'd be if we were playing gangsters," he said.

"Oh. Well, *c'est la vie*." She sat back in her chair. "How do you stand in the tournament?"

"I'm doing okay."

"This whole business ruined my concentration yesterday," she said. "I sat out most of the hands the rest of the night."

Which was the difference between a pro and an amateur. Sitting out hands was what Kat should have done as well.

"I know it's easy for me to say since I'm not a suspect," he said, "but don't think about it today. If you keep looking around for the police to come and get you, you'll be knocked out of the game in no time."

"I am a suspect." It was a statement, not a question.

"I guess so."

She thought a moment, then said, "All things considered, I'd rather be a moll."

Later, when he thought back, it would still seem odd to Jimmy that the sound of the broken glass had come last. First came the splash, as the body hit the water in the pool. It sounded more like a sack of cement striking the ground, but the accompanying splash made it clear that something had struck the water.

Next came the shower of glass, with the sun glinting off it so that it looked like someone had sprinkled the pool area with fairy dust.

And that was when they all heard the tinkling sound of glass, which—for a moment—increased the whole fairy-dust image because it sounded more like bells.

Then it all came together and the horror of what had happened struck them.

"Oh, my God!" Sabine cried out.

Most people around the pool were frozen. Jimmy was one of the few who left his place and went to the pool to see what exactly had happened.

First he saw the body. It had plummeted to the bottom when

it first hit and was now floating back to the top, ribbons of red streaming from it. But it took a moment for him to realize it was blood. Suddenly, there was screaming everywhere. Horrified guests began running about aimlessly. But Jimmy didn't hear any of that. It was all dull background noise to him.

Then, while most of the others were still watching the body, he saw three things floating on top of the water. Instinctively—although not on a conscious level—he knew they had come from the dead man's pocket.

Two of them were floating faceup: the jack of spades and the king of clubs. He knew that the card facing down would turn out to be the queen of hearts.

And he knew that the man in the water would turn out to be a poker player.

TWENTY

The name on the driver's license in his wallet is Jesse Dell," Detective Cooper said.

Why did that not come as a surprise? Jimmy thought. Dell was a posse member, one of the names Kat had written down for him.

Once again Cooper was depending on Jimmy for information about poker players. And there was also the little fact that Jimmy was a witness to Jesse Dell's swan dive.

"Right through a window on the top floor," he told Jimmy.

"The high-roller floor."

"Is that right?"

"So they tell me."

"You're not a high roller, Mr. Spain?"

"Far from it, Detective Cooper. I'm just a working stiff, like you, only my job is poker."

"That's the way you look at it?"

"That's the way I look at it."

Around the pool, uniformed police and detectives were taking statements from people, checking their IDs, and then letting them leave. Off to one side Sabine Chevalier was still sitting in her chair.

"Tell me something about Jesse Dell, Mr. Spain," Cooper said.

"He is—or was—a member of the posse."

"The same group Tim Bennett was a member of?"

"Yes."

"Why would anyone want to kill posse members?"

"They're obnoxious?"

"That may be the case, Mr. Spain," Cooper said, "but that wouldn't be a motive for murder . . . would it?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "I'm not the expert in that department. You and your partner are. By the way, where is your partner?"

"On another assignment, thank God," Cooper said before he could stop himself.

Jimmy looked over at Sabine.

"What happens now to Miss Chevalier?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she was a suspect for the first murder," Jimmy said, "but there she was, sitting with me when the second happened."

"Yes, I guess you are her alibi this time."

"Me and everybody else around the pool."

Cooper turned his head up and looked at the building.

"Not exactly the way a woman would kill someone," he said. "Not throwing him through a window, anyway."

"About the only similarity I see here is the cards," Jimmy said.

Cooper looked at him.

"Are you playing detective now, Mr. Spain?"

"Hey," Jimmy responded, "there they were, floating in the pool. I couldn't help noticing."

The cards were now in a plastic bag in Cooper's pocket. The facedown card had, indeed, been the queen of hearts.

"Still no significance to these particular cards, Mr. Spain?" the detective asked.

"None that I can see, but I can ask around, if you like. Somebody else might know."

Cooper regarded him for a moment, then said, "Yeah, why don't you do that for me . . . but don't play at being a detective, Mr. Spain. Just a question or two."

"That's all I ever intended to do, Detective."

Jimmy waited while Cooper took a statement from Sabine. He wondered if the word had traveled through the hotel yet, if Mike Sexton and his bosses had heard about the second murder. Were they still going to want him nosing around after a second killing?

Jimmy replayed in his head Cooper's warning about not playing detective. He needed to talk to other members of the posse. Maybe they'd tell him something they wouldn't tell the police, although why they'd hold anything back he didn't know. But while he wanted to talk to them, he also had to start the third day of play. He was sure the police would still let the tournament continue; it was virtually the only way to keep everyone in one place.

What he needed was a proxy, somebody to do some legwork for him. He didn't know who it could be, though, and suddenly it hit him. If the man would even talk to him again . . . He went off to find a phone book and make a call.

♠

When Jimmy returned to the pool moments later, the police were still conducting interviews. He walked over to Sa-

bine Chevalier, who had graduated from coffee to mimosas. He didn't know how many she'd had, but her eyes were shiny. He wondered if she was in shock.

"Sabine?"

She had been staring off into the pool, the body having been removed.

"Jimmy?"

"Come on," he said, putting his hands out to her. "They're going to start playing."

She put her hands into his, and he helped her to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I am fine."

"Did the police take your statement?"

"Yes."

"Then you're free to go."

"I suppose . . ." She turned her head and focused on his face. "Am I off your list of suspects?"

"I don't have a list, Sabine," he told her. "I think you should be more concerned about getting off the police's list, which I think you did just by being here when the body hit the water."

"Well, good," she said. "Then that man's death accomplished something, right?"

"I suppose you could look at it that way."

He wasn't all that sure whether Sabine actually knew she was clear to leave, but he was sure someone would stop them if she wasn't.

As they walked through the casino, Jimmy realized he didn't know how to get in touch with Mike Sexton or his bosses except to wait for play to start. Once he'd located Sexton again,

he was going to have to find out if he was staying in the hotel and what his contact numbers were. It would have been helpful to be able to locate Sexton when he needed to.

He walked Sabine to the poker room, where she went off to find her table. She was walking a little unsteadily, and he hoped the mimosas would not inhibit her play.

"Excuse me?"

He turned and found himself looking into the myopic eyes of a tall, muscle-bound young man with unruly black hair. He was wearing a very earnest, intense, expression. He had a crucifix dangling from one ear, and a wraparound tattoo of a big slick—an ace and a king—smothered his bicep. Also on his neck, just beneath the earring, was a tattoo of a pair of deuces. He wore a very tight maroon T-shirt.

"Yes?"

"I saw you come from the pool. . . . I heard that another posse member has been killed," the man said.

"That's right," Jimmy said. "Are you a member?"

"Well," the young man said, "we've had some conversations about me joining, but I haven't made up my mind yet."

"So you know them, then."

"Oh, yes, sir, I do."

"Can you point them out to me?"

"I don't see any of them here right now," the man said, "but they usually hang out together—except for Tim Bennett. He sometimes goes off on his own. He's dead, too, you know. Somebody killed him."

"I know that."

"It's all over the hotel and the casino," he went on. "They don't know who did it, but somebody stuck a knife in him."

The young man did not seem all that broken up about either killing—and he had his facts wrong.

"What's your name?" Jimmy asked. The man's intensity was palpable. It almost floated around him like a thick haze.

"Oh, sorry," the man said, "I'm Leonard Krieger. My friends call me Lenny." He stuck out his hand. Jimmy took it, releasing as soon as he could without seeming rude. Lenny's grip was hot and moist, very powerful and very unpleasant.

"How well did you know Tim Bennett, Lenny?"

"Pretty well," Lenny said. "He was always tryin' to recruit me."

Jimmy had the feeling the young man was lying. It was more likely he was the one trying to recruit himself into the group. How much of a geek, he wondered, did you have to be to be rebuked by a group of geeks?

"Lenny, my name is Jimmy Spain. If you see any of those guys, would you tell them I'm looking for them?"

"If you're lookin' to make them an offer of some kind," Lenny said, "I'm your man, Mr. Spain."

"An offer?"

"You know, like to back them?" The young man's face took on a hungry look.

"Lenny, I'm a player," Jimmy told him. "I don't back other players."

Now the hungry look turned nasty.

"Then what the fuck are ya botherin' me for?" he demanded, and stormed away.

Jimmy thought this was a young man with some serious issues. Whatever his problems, he obviously was not going to be much help finding the other posse members.

Luckily, Mike Sexton appeared at that moment, spotted him, waved, and walked over.

"What the hell happened, Jimmy?"

Jimmy explained.

"And you were there? You were a witness?"

"I was a witness to the body hitting the water," Jimmy said. "That's about it."

"Do you think the murders are connected?"

"They're connected, Mike."

"How do you know?"

Jimmy almost told Sexton about the Picasso flop cards on both bodies but stopped himself. The police might be keeping that to themselves.

"Two posse members dead in a twelve-hour span? Do the math."

"My lord," Sexton said. "I guess my boss and I better talk to the police."

"Yep, you better do that."

"You're still gonna hep, ain't cha, Jimmy?" Sexton's accent was deepening as he became more agitated.

"I suppose so, Mike," Jimmy said. "But I need you to point out Brouchet or Abrahms or any others there might be."

Sexton turned and looked around. "Ah don't see any of them."

"Then describe them to me."

Tall, short, fat, thin, but the clothes are always the same, right down to the ball caps. Jimmy wasn't surprised.

"I'll find them," Jimmy said. "What can you tell me about a guy named Krieger, Leonard or Lenny Krieger."

"Not much," Sexton said. "Another Internet player."

"As good as Bennett?"

"Oh, no, Bennett is—I mean, was—the best of the bunch."

"But this guy Krieger, he's not in the posse?" Jimmy asked.

"No," Sexton said, "he wants to be, but no. Why?"

"I spoke with him," Jimmy explained. "He doesn't seem to be wrapped too tight."

"You think he did it?"

"I'm not saying that at all, Mike, I'm just asking questions."

At that moment Kat appeared but didn't see them. Jimmy looked over and noticed Sexton's boss, too.

"Give me a number where I can reach you at all times."

"Yeah, I better go. Here's my card with my cell number on it. See you later, Jimmy."

He started to go but stopped and turned. Pointing, he said, "'Bad Boy' show. I can see it now. You're perfect." Ever the ambassador. Jimmy knew he was being buttered up.

As Sexton walked away, Kat came rushing up.

"Dude, is it true?"

"What'd you hear?"

She told him she'd heard about the body landing in the pool.

"That's pretty much it."

"Could he have fallen by accident?"

"It was no accident, kid. He was murdered."

"What the hell is going on? Are they gonna cancel the tournament?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"How are we gonna concentrate on our games? Talk about a bad beat," she wondered aloud.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "You just put the rest of this stuff out of your mind."

"I'll try, dude," she said. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it, but I'll try."

"You'll do it, Kat," Jimmy said. "Just play your game."

The card that makes your world turn upside down. It's hard to turn back now. You're living on the edge.

—Dallas Jack

TWENTY-ONE

Jimmy was not surprised that the second murder was not the main topic of discussion among the poker players. It was the third day of the game, after all. Antes and blinds were up, and a player could lose pretty quickly if he lost his concentration. Plus it was getting pretty close to payoff time. Top fifty made money back, and the players were hungry for that achievement.

Jimmy took a few early hands, tried to keep up his patter, throwing some of the players at the table off balance or pissing them off. He was raking in some chips when a man working for the Bellagio leaned over and told Jimmy there was someone who needed to see him.

That wasn't going to be a problem. Just like yesterday anyone that had official business with detectives on anything related to the murders would not get blinded off. A time-out wouldn't hurt them. This break came under that ruling.

"I'll be back," he told the dealer. He stood up and followed the man off the floor.

"Here he is," the man said, and left.

"Vic," Jimmy said to Vic Porcelli, his father's ex-partner he had bumped into the first day of the tournament, "thanks for coming."

"I wasn't gonna," Vic admitted, shaking Jimmy's hand, "but you said it was important."

"I wasn't even sure you'd still be here."

"We got two more days at the hotel."

"How'd you like to spend those two days here?" Jimmy asked.

"We played here some already, Jimmy. We thought we'd try some other places—"

"No," Jimmy said, "how would you like to stay here in a room? Finish out your vacation here?"

"I told you, we can't afford—"

Exasperated, Jimmy said, "No charge to you, Vic."

"You mean . . . stay here, free?"

"That's right," Jimmy said. "Room service included."

"Who do I have to kill?"

"Somebody's already been killed, Vic," Jimmy said. "That's what I need to talk to you about. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee. . . ."

They went down the escalator to Palio Pronto.

"Just black," Vic told the girl. He looked at Jimmy. "No lattes or granitas or whatever for me—just plain coffee."

Vic Porcelli had always been plain—at least, back when Jimmy knew him. His age fell just about dead center between Jimmy and his dad, about fifteen years either way, maybe a little more. If he was near retirement, as he'd said the other day, then he was sixty or close to it. Jimmy had known him as a young man, did not know how he had developed over the years, but the way he'd ordered his coffee told a lot about him.

"How's your wife doing on the penny slots?"

"You know you could win a shitload of money on those things?" Vic asked, surprised. "She hit for five hundred on a machine where the jackpot was over ninety thousand. I tell ya, she's payin' for this trip with her goddamned penny slots. But you

didn't call me over here for small talk, did you? Not if you're offerin' us a free room in the Bellagio."

"No, I didn't," Jimmy said. "I don't know if you've heard but there was a murder here yesterday."

"Heard somethin'," Vic said, "but I try not to think about those things when I'm on vacation. Makes the wife crazy, ya know?"

"I don't know, but I can imagine," Jimmy said. "Anyway, there was another murder today."

"No kiddin'?"

"Both victims were poker players, here for a big game."

"One of them big games on TV?"

"Yes," Jimmy said. "That's what I'm doing here, too. Playing in that game."

"You're a poker player? A pro?"

"Yes."

"Boy, I'll bet that didn't sit well with your old man."

"It didn't," Jimmy said, "but it's what I do."

"Okay." Vic sipped his coffee. "I hate these Styrofoam cups. Gimme cardboard, any day, like the old Chock full o'Nuts containers when we were kids."

"Anyway," Jimmy said, "somehow I got myself roped into helping out."

"Helpin' the police?"

"Ah, no—well, yeah, kinda. The detective in charge has been asking me questions about the poker scene. And I've been asked to look into the whole thing by the WPT—"

"The what?"

"The people running the tournament."

"What makes them think you can do that?" Vic asked.

"They know that my dad was a cop. I told them it isn't in the

genes, but they didn't listen. They just want someone who's not connected with the Vegas police to nose around."

"I think I'm gettin' it," Vic said. "You want some quick lessons."

"I want more than that, Vic. I want help."

"My ol' lady's gonna squeal."

"Look, go and get her and bring her here. I'll check you in, get you a nice room, some comped meals. Think that'll smooth it over with her a bit?"

"A lot," Vic said. "This place is supposed to have a killer buffet."

"I guess that would be the appropriate word for it," Jimmy said. "Look, I'm going to be playing poker most of today, probably until midnight, if I'm still lucky. But if you and I could meet for dinner—I'll buy you a steak—we can talk. Would your wife mind eating at the Buffet alone?"

"With all that food? She won't even notice I'm gone. Okay, where d'ya wanna meet?"

After arranging to meet with Vic first at the registration desk and then later for dinner, Jimmy called Mike Sexton's cell. He told him what he needed, what he had promised Vic Porcelli and his wife. Sexton said no problem, he'd have it in the computer by the time Jimmy got to the registration desk.

True to Mike Sexton's word, by the time Vic and his wife met Jimmy at the front desk they were checked not only into a room but into a suite.

"A bellman will take you up," Jimmy said. "I'll meet you for dinner in front of Prime at seven."

"Prime? That their steakhouse?"

"One of the best in town."

"I'll be there."

Jimmy leaned in. "Your wife seems quiet."

"She don't want you to see how excited she is."

"Good," Jimmy said. "I hope she enjoys herself. And I hope you don't mind me making this into a working vacation for you."

"Hell," Vic said, "I been goin' crazy, anyway. The cards sure ain't been running. Every time I get twenty, the damn dealer turns over twenty-one. You know how many times I seen a five card twenty-one?"

Jimmy had decided years ago that blackjack was a frustrating game. In poker you never had to worry about the house odds.

"Get settled," Jimmy said. "Then we'll talk."

While the Porcellis were shown to their suite Jimmy went back to the tournament.

TWENTY-TWO

Jimmy finally admitted to himself that he probably wasn't going to do very well. Winning a tournament of this magnitude required skill and luck, but for either it also required concentration. He just had not been able to give it his all since day one. There was too much else going on—two murders, not to mention the appearance of two specters from his past. First Paulie DiCicca, with his not-so-veiled threats of blackmail, and then Vic Porcelli, bringing with him unwanted memories of his father's disapproval. But he still had chips, more than most, in fact. Kat was another story. She was struggling, had roughly about twenty thousand left. But the banter at the table next to Jimmy wasn't just about chips, it was all about the murders.

Doyle Brunson was holding court. He was one of the top-ten chip leaders at this point. He sat there in his cowboy hat with a knowing smile and stacks of chips in front of him. He didn't have to say anything; it was Scooter and Skippy, the freak show act, who was doing all the talking.

"You know, when somethin' like this goes down," Scooter said, "tragedies like this . . . really makes you think. Makes poker and all this cash seem a little insignificant, doesn't it?"

"What the fuck are you sayin'?" Skippy's high-pitched voice cut through the air. His head spun around. "You wanna go back

to that two-bit motel in Culver City where I found you? Money insignificant? Are you fuckin' nuts or what?"

"I was just sayin'—" Scooter started, but he was cut off by the voice of James Woods, who was still in the tournament at another table.

"Would you guys shut the fuck up?" he shouted, turning around in his seat. "Goddamned circus act. Have some respect for the dead, for god's sake."

Even Doyle Brunson got a chuckle out of that.

Jimmy kept thinking. It was possible that enlisting the aid of Vic Porcelli might free him up to play his game, but that remained to be seen. As it looked now, he'd last as long as he could and see what help he could be to Kat. If they each made it to the end of day three, they'd be in the money—which meant they would have earned back their buy in plus more.

He held his own until the dinner break and then went to Prime to meet Vic. When he got there the Philly police captain was waiting and had obviously donned his best. His hair was slicked back, he was wearing a sports jacket with what looked like a new shirt and slacks and loafers. He looked ill at ease as well-dressed people moved past him into the restaurant.

"Hey, Vic."

"Jimmy, hey," Vic said, putting out his hand.

"How's the suite?"

"Oh, it's great, man, great," Vic said. "The wife loves it."

"Want to go inside?"

Vic turned and looked at Prime, then back at Jimmy.

"To tell you the truth I'm kinda uncomfortable about goin' in there. I'm just a old guy from Philly, you know?"

"Would you be more at home at the Buffet?"

"If it wouldn't be a problem for you."

"Naw, no problem at all. Let's go."

They worked their way back down to the main floor and headed for the Bellagio Buffet.

"Are we going to run into your wife here?"

"No, she ate earlier. She's graduatin' to the nickel slots."

Jimmy paid for two buffets and they were shown to a table. They asked the waitress to bring two iced teas and then hit the buffet. Jimmy came back with a plate while Vic Porcelli expertly balanced three of them.

"Do you not plan to go back?" Jimmy asked as he sat opposite him.

"Sure, why?"

"Nothing."

"I should tell you," Vic said, picking up his knife and fork, "I made contact with the detective in charge of these two cases."

"Cooper?"

"Yeah, the black guy," Vic said.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Well, he was there when I went to the pool to have a look at the second crime scene."

"Is that really the crime scene? I thought that would be the floor he came flying from."

"That, too, but I didn't think I'd be able to get in—at least, not without permission of the detective in charge. So I went to the pool and there were still cops there, including this guy Cooper. So I introduced myself."

"And?"

"And he gave me a little professional courtesy. I acted like I was real curious. He didn't want to talk to me, though, until I told him I was a captain of homicide."

"And is that true?"

"Yeah, it's true," Vic said. "Jimmy, homicides are my business."

Vic had managed to decimate one whole plate, shoved it aside, and pulled the second toward him.

"By the way, did you try those little chocolates that are beside the bed? Delicious. I think the maid gave us extras. Almost a whole box worth."

"Yeah, they're pretty good. Anyway, what did you find out?"

"Not much," Vic said around a huge bite of fried chicken.

"But I thought you said—"

"That's because they don't know much," Vic continued. "They apparently had motive for the first killing, but they can't match it up with the second."

"What about their belief that the first killing was done by a woman?"

"Let me tell you somethin' I know from experience," Vic said. "A woman rarely plans a murder. She'll usually grab something close at hand—like a kitchen knife—if she's going to kill a man."

"But there was something about a woman being in the room—"

"What they had was this—the guy'd had sex before he was killed," Vic said. "I'll tell you somethin' else from experience. Guys don't only have sex with girls."

"You're saying Bennett was gay?"

"I learned somethin' years ago from your dad, Jimmy," Vic said. "He told me, 'Don't make anybody have to read between the lines when you talk. Most people can't read for shit.' You should taste this chicken."

Jimmy had heard the always-say-what-you-mean speech many times.

"Besides, having a guy picked up and tossed through a window has convinced them the killer may not be a woman. At least, not the killer of the second victim, and probably not the first."

"Tossed? How do they know he was tossed?"

Vic swallowed first, chased the fried chicken with some tea, then signaled a passing waitress for a refill.

"Cameras, in the hall."

Jimmy was surprised.

"They have the second murder on camera?"

"They got the guy on tape twice," Vic explained. "Once they knew what they were lookin' for they went back through tapes on the first murder. The guy walked down the hall carrying a massage table, bold as you please."

"How'd he know Bennett wanted a massage?"

"The guy had a standing order for one. All the killer had to do was know that. He canceled the order for that day, then showed up himself.

"On the second murder Cooper said the guy picked the victim up by his collar and belt and flung him through the window . . . after stabbing him. He had to be damned strong to break that window, even using a man's body to do it."

"Jesus," Jimmy said. "Why stab him? I would think the glass or the fall would kill him."

"He probably wasn't sure what would happen if the guy hit the pool. He might have survived the fall."

"You mean the killer didn't aim for the pool?"

"He would've had to be real good to aim for the pool and hit it," Vic said. "No, I think he pretty much just wanted to toss the guy through the window. This guy's obviously a psychopath."

"So the camera didn't show the killer's face either time?"

"Nope," Vic said. "The way I understand it, the killer used

the massage table to block the cameras the first time and was wearing something with a hood the second time and was smart enough to keep his face turned away from the cameras."

"That shows a knowledge of the high-roller floor, doesn't it?" Jimmy asked. "I mean, knowing where the cameras are?"

Vic stopped eating and stared at Jimmy.

"Hey, maybe this detective stuff is in the genes after all," he said. "That was very good. Your ol' man woulda been proud."

"I doubt it," Jimmy said.

"This really is a helluva buffet," Vic said. "I'm goin' back for some baby backs. You?"

"Maybe," Jimmy said. "You go ahead."

Jimmy was completely impressed with this man's consumption of food, especially as he knocked out details of an extremely gory murder. What a man, what a metabolism.

While Vic went back up for two or three more plates Jimmy wondered how the man had managed to come up with so much information. It had to be more than one cop getting another cop to talk to him.

When Vic returned, Jimmy asked, "Do you take your badge on vacation with you?"

"Sure," Vic said, setting his plates down. He dug into his pocket, came out with a wallet, and flashed his captain's shield, which now had a dollop of barbecue sauce on it.

"Did you show that to Cooper?"

"I did."

He put the shield away and sat down, attacking his food again. This time, instead of one at a time, he took some from each plate in turn.

"So he just told you all this?" Jimmy asked. "For no reason?"

"He had his reasons," Vic said. "I'm a homicide specialist and he ain't. That was one reason."

"And another?"

"He likes to talk," Vic said. "With people who like to talk, all you gotta do is give 'em a chance. He talk to you?"

"Some."

"Be a good listener," Vic advised. "He'll talk even more."

"Did you meet his partner, Detective Devine?"

"No, I only talked to Cooper."

Jimmy nibbled at his own food, wondering if he should say what he was going to say next. After all, the Vegas police were keeping that information under wraps. Still . . .

"Did he tell you about the cards?"

"Nuh-uh," Vic said. "What cards?"

"The cards that were placed in the pockets of the victims."

"You tell me."

So he did. He explained what a Picasso flop was and where the cards had been found.

"You're probably right about the second set," Vic said when Jimmy was done. "They must have gotten knocked from his pocket by the impact. Same cards, huh?"

"Yes."

"And the suits have no significance that you can see?" Vic asked.

"No," Jimmy said. "Cooper already asked. They're holding that little tidbit back, aren't they?"

"Yeah. That's so they can weed out the phony confessions. Somebody calls, says, 'I did it, I killed so and so,' and they ask, what was in the victim's pocket?"

"I see," Jimmy said. "But what does it mean to the killer?"

"That's for somebody to figure out," Vic said.

"Like you?"

"Maybe you," the Philly cop said. "You know more about these people, and the game, than I do."

"Are you saying I'm better suited to investigate this than you are?"

"Better suited, probably," Vic said, "but not better equipped. You have knowledge of poker and the people involved, I have the know-how to investigate."

Jimmy closed his eyes. He knew the words he was going to hear next.

"So what we have here," Vic went on, "is a partnership. We could be partners, like me and your dad was."

"So," Jimmy said without commenting, "you're willing to work on this?"

"I'm willin' to nose around," Vic said, "only because I'm bored with Vegas—except for the food. You keep feedin' me, and I'll do some work." Vic laughed. "You can't get yourself a private eye cheaper than that."

"Okay, then," Jimmy said. "What would be your first step?"

"I'll talk to the other members of this group—the posse?"

"Right."

"Do you have their names?"

"I have some." Jimmy took a slip of paper from his pocket and slid it across the table, avoiding a dollop of French dressing that had found its way there from Vic's first or second salad. "I can get the others from Mike Sexton, if there are, in fact, others."

"Who's Sexton?" Vic picked up the paper and put it into his shirt pocket.

"He works for the WPT and the Travel Channel," Jimmy said. "He's one of the commentators on TV."

"Oh, right. I think I've seen parts of that show once or twice before. He works with that other guy, that Vincent van Gogh guy."

"I think it's Van Patten."

"Right. Can you call him and get the other names?"

"Now?"

"Why not? You have a cell phone, don't you?"

"Actually, no," Jimmy said. He did have one, supplied to him by Harold Landrigan as part of his whole living arrangement, but he left it in his suite when he went out. Usually, there was nobody he wanted to call while he was out, and nobody he wanted to hear from. The cell phone explosion was something that had happened while he was inside, and he had not embraced it.

"But I can go to a pay phone and do it."

"You don't have to." Vic reached into one of his jacket pockets and came out with a phone. "Use mine. I'm gonna go check out the desserts."

Jimmy called Sexton and found out there were six posse members in all. Sexton gave him the names Kat had not been able to supply. By the time Vic returned with a plate full of desserts he'd written down the other names and hung up.

"Got 'em?" Vic asked.

"Yeah." He gave him the second slip of paper, which went into the same pocket as the first. "There's four more of them."

"So they're all at risk," Vic said. "I'll find out what the Vegas cops are doin' about protectin' them."

As Vic popped a chocolate éclair into his mouth, Jimmy couldn't help but ask, "How do you not weigh three hundred pounds?"

"Metabolism," Vic said. "Accordin' to my doctor I burn up an amazin' amount of calories during the course of the day. I

gotta tell ya, if you hadn't come to me with this, I woulda gone nuts here."

"Well then," Jimmy said, "I'm glad I could be of help."

"You want some dessert?" Vic asked.

"No," Jimmy said, "I'm good."

TWENTY-THREE

Jimmy gave Vic his room number in the hotel before the two men separated outside the Buffet.

"What are you going to tell Detective Cooper if he finds out you're nosing around?" he asked.

"Just what I told you," Vic said. "I'm bored. In fact, maybe I'll offer him my services as an outside consultant. I know we've done that in Philly."

Jimmy couldn't see a downside to that, as long as Cooper didn't find out he was the one who'd called in Vic in the first place.

He went back to the game and tried like hell to focus on the cards and players for the rest of the evening. Having located Kat's table, he looked up from time to time to see how she was doing. From his seat he could also see Sabine Chevalier's table. Both women seemed to be holding their own. He thought it was amazing that either of them were still around, given the circumstances. He reminded himself to tell them what Vic Porcelli had said—that the cops were not that intent on proving that a woman had murdered Tim Bennett.

Unless, of course, there were two killers.

Jimmy hadn't given Paulie DiCicca much thought, but he had barely left the elevator court when Paulie came bearing down on him.

"You probably forgot all about me with all this excitement goin' on, Jimbo," Paulie said, as if reading Jimmy's mind.

"You got that right, Paulie."

"Well, I ain't goin' away, ya know."

"Even with the hotel and casino crawling with cops?" Jimmy asked.

"Naw," Paulie said bravely. "They got nuttin' on me. I did my time."

"So you heard about the murders."

"I heard somethin' about a guy takin' a header inta the pool. What's your connection?"

"I was there," Jimmy said. "I saw him hit the water. Plus, he's a poker player. So as a witness, and a poker player, I've got cops crawling all over me."

"That a fact?" Paulie looked all around him while Jimmy took in today's turtleneck. It was a horrible mustard color and made him look like he had no neck at all.

"Yep, even more so because there have been two poker players murdered."

"Don't sound like a very safe occupation."

"Not over the last couple of days."

Paulie suddenly narrowed his eyes and stared at Jimmy suspiciously.

"Say, your ol' man used ta be a cop, right?"

"That's right."

"That why the cops are askin' you questions?"

"I guess as a poker player and a son of a cop they think I'll have some insight."

Now Paulie looked around a little more nervously.

"Hey, Paulie, I've got to ask."

"What?"

"What's with the turtlenecks, man? This is Vegas. It's hot!"

"Outside, yeah," Paulie said, "but I stay inside where the action is, and that air-conditioning'll kill ya!"

Paulie's feral little eyes darted around. "Even though they got nuttin' on me, I hate cops."

"Then you better get going, Paulie, because here comes the detective in charge."

"Where?" Paulie looked around wildly.

"The black guy in the suit."

"Fuck!" Paulie swore, spotting the guy. He pointed a diminutive index finger at Jimmy. "We ain't finished. We gotta talk."

"Sure, Paulie," Jimmy said. "Later."

Paulie looked back as the black man got closer, then swore again and took off, almost running across the casino floor.

As the black man reached him, Jimmy said, "Excuse me, can you tell me the way to the pool?"

"I don't really know," the man said with a Jamaican accent, "but I don' think you really wan' to go there, mon. I heard there are cops all over de place."

"I see," Jimmy said. "Well, thanks for the warning."

"No worries, mon."

The black man went into the elevator court, and Jimmy started across the casino floor to the poker room, laughing to himself.

Jimmy tried to get his head back in the game. Two murders in two days should take precedence over a poker game, but as he looked around the table and the room he realized hardly anyone

was giving the two dead men any thought—except maybe the other posse members.

He noticed that players were being called away from the game, most likely to be interviewed by the police. He wondered if the cops would ever come to the decision that the tournament should be stopped.

Every so often, when a player was eliminated, his or her name would circulate around the room, especially if they were a name player. You'd hear whispers that Hellmuth is gone or Negreanu just went broke. It was worth the huge fifteen-thousand-dollar entry fee just to be around to hear that. Others simply got knocked out of the game and went slinking away. He wondered how many of the other posse members were among the players who had been eliminated. Or if they might have been yanked from the game in his absence for their own good.

He got involved in some hands when his cards warranted it, won more than he lost, and with an hour to go in the day's play he was safely on his way to the fourth day. That's why, when he saw Kat during a table break going into the rest room, he followed her. With fifteen minutes to return he figured it was long enough for a short talk.

"Hey, Jimmy," she said when she came out. From the look in her eyes he could tell she was exhausted.

"How you doing, kid?"

"Holdin' my own," she said. "I feel like I'm all in, though."

He let her get away with the poker lingo this time.

"A good night's rest will do you good."

"Dude, how can I rest when I'm a suspect in a murder?" she asked. "And now there's been another one."

"That's what I wanted to tell you," he said, and went on to explain why she most likely was not a suspect anymore.

"So they think the same person killed them both?"

"It's probable," he said. "Look, have you seen what's been going on with the other posse members? Any of them been eliminated?" He realized how that sounded and added, "From the game, I mean."

"As a matter of fact, I saw Eddie Brouchet get knocked off a couple of hours ago—um, I mean, knocked out of the game."

"Did you see where he went?"

"No, dude, I didn't."

"Okay," he said. "Better get back and finish strong. Then go straight to your room and get some sleep."

"You don't have to tell this lady twice," she said.

"Lady?"

"Did I say that? Okay . . . sometimes your ideas aren't half bad. Cloney Gowan does get a lot of attention."

Jimmy studied her: lip gloss, eye shadow, miniskirt, and silk blouse. He had been so preoccupied with the murders he hadn't noticed the changes she was going through.

"You look nice."

"Don't say 'nice,'" she said. "That dates you. At least say 'hot.'"

"Okay, you look hot."

She studied him for a beat.

"Maybe not. By the way, how are you holdin' up, old man?"

"This old man is doing better than you, kiddo," he said. "I've had lots of late nights in my time."

"Yeah, I'll bet," she said. Abruptly, she grabbed his tie, pulled it loose, and took it off.

"What are you doing?"

"If I'm gonna be more like a lady, you gotta loosen up some. Stop wearin' a tie every day."

She gave it to him, and he put it in his pocket. "That sounds fair."

"Have you been nosin' around like you said?" she asked.

"Some."

"Find out anything?"

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "I'm not much of a detective."

TWENTY-FOUR

At midnight the game broke up. Everybody did what they had to do to get their chips back the next day and then headed for elevators, escalators, or the casino floor. The field had been narrowed considerably, but there were still enough participants to keep the game going another couple of days.

Jimmy wanted to find Sabine and tell her essentially the same thing he'd told Kat, but before he could locate her the police located him, in the persons of Detectives Cooper and Devine.

The two Vegas cops approached him, Devine looking determined and Cooper disappointed.

"You're mine, asshole," Devine said right away.

"Not tonight," Jimmy said quickly. "I have a headache."

"Har, har, you're comin' with us," Devine said. "Do I get to put the cuffs on you . . . please?"

Jimmy knew the other man would have liked to cuff him in front of everyone. He looked at Cooper but was getting nothing from the black detective.

"No, that's okay," Jimmy said. "I'll come quietly. We going to headquarters?"

"Just come with us," Devine said. "You've got a lot of explaining to do."

That could have meant any number of things, but rather than guess, he went along and decided to wait to find out.

"Is this going to take long, guys?" Jimmy asked. "I'm kind of hungry. It's been a long day."

"Shut up and sit down, smart guy," Devine said.

They took him to the same office they'd used last time, only this time both Devine and Cooper came in with him. Cooper still hadn't said a word.

Jimmy sat, avoiding the ergonomic chair this time.

"I checked you out, smart guy."

Oh, great.

"Why didn't you tell me you did time?" Cooper asked.

Now Jimmy knew why he looked disappointed.

"For murder, no less," Devine said almost gleefully.

"Manslaughter," Jimmy said.

"You pleaded down to manslaughter," Devine said.

"I did my time."

"And you thought you could hide that from us?" Devine asked.

"Why would I try to hide it when I know you can check me out?"

"Then why didn't you tell us?" Cooper asked.

"It wasn't important," Jimmy said. "It had nothing to do with what's going on here."

"You knew you'd be a suspect if you told us," Devine said. "You knew I'd lock your ass up."

"For what?" Jimmy asked with a shrug. "Come on, guys. I was sitting at the pool when the guy took his header. I'm innocent."

"Of the second murder maybe," Devine said. "But how about the first?"

"Same guy," Jimmy said. "Again, not me."

"We'll see," Devine said. He looked at Cooper. "I say we cuff him and take him in, but it's your call."

Cooper studied his partner and then Jimmy before speaking. "He's right, Andy," he finally said. "It'd never stick. We'd end up cutting him loose."

"Fuck 'im," Devine said. "Let him spend some more time in a cell."

"Hey, guys," Jimmy said, spreading his hands. "I'm trying to help you, remember?"

"Take a walk, Andy."

"What?"

"Better yet, go home," Cooper said. "I'll finish up here and see you tomorrow morning."

Devine stared at Cooper, glared at Jimmy, then said to his partner, "This is bullshit."

He slammed the door on the way out.

"I'm disappointed, Jimmy," Cooper said. "I was square with you."

"I was square with you, too, Detective," Jimmy said. "And I've been helpful."

"Yeah, you have. That's why I haven't thrown your ass in jail."

"Along with the fact that I didn't do it," Jimmy said. "Either murder."

Cooper pointed a finger at him.

"You still should have told me, and you know it."

Jimmy opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind and snapped it shut.

"Okay," he said after a moment, "you're right. I should've told you. I'm sorry."

Cooper spread his hands.

"That's all I wanted."

"I'm still new at being an ex-con, Detective," Jimmy said, "but I'll get the hang of it."

"Look, just stay away from Devine. He'll haul you in if he gets the chance just to break your balls."

"That would do more than break my balls, it would bust me out of the tournament."

"Yeah, well, don't let him know that."

"Thanks for the warning. Do you have a regular partner?"

"I did," Cooper said but didn't elaborate. Jimmy figured the issue was as much his business as his plea was Cooper's.

"By the way, do the tournament people know about your record?"

"Don't know if they do or not," Jimmy said, "but it doesn't matter."

"That wouldn't get you disqualified?"

"No," Jimmy said. "There are other players with records."

"What about the casinos?"

"I didn't do time for anything related to gaming," Jimmy said. "I'm in the clear."

"Okay," the black detective said, "you can go. I'll walk out with you in case Andy's waiting in the hall."

The hall was clear. Devine was nowhere in sight. True to his word, however, Cooper walked Jimmy out to the casino floor.

"An odd thing happened today," the detective said.

"What's that?"

"I met a cop from Philadelphia who's vacationing here," Cooper said. "Turns out he's a homicide specialist. Took an interest in these two cases."

"Is that a fact?"

Jimmy realized that in checking him out Cooper would have found out that he was originally from Philadelphia. If he dug a little deeper, he'd find out that Jimmy's father was a cop. Perhaps he was putting two and two together and wanted to see what Jimmy would say.

"Yep," Cooper said.

"And you talked to him?"

"Why not?" Cooper said. "He's got a lot more experience than I do. Figured I'd pick his brain a little."

"Did it help?"

"Some."

The two of them stood there for a moment, on the edge of the casino floor, and then Cooper said, "Well, I better get going. My wife's gonna wonder what the hell happened to me."

"Thanks for the help with Devine," Jimmy said. "I guess you kept me out of the slammer tonight."

"Sure," Cooper said. "See you around."

As the detective started to walk away, Jimmy called out, "Can I ask you something?"

The man turned and looked back.

"Sure."

"The tape from the cameras on the high-roller floor, did they tell you the size of the killer?"

"Luckily," Cooper said, "we have the victim standing right in front of him on the tape, so we can tell he was a tall man. Not necessarily a big man, but the fact that he lifted the victim makes him pretty strong."

"So that definitely rules out a woman."

"As far as the second victim is concerned, yeah," said Cooper. "But it's not out of the question that there could be two separate killers, the first one being a woman. It's unlikely, though."

"So you're working on the premise that the murders are connected?"

"Yes," Cooper said. "Even though one was killed in his room and the other stabbed and thrown out a window, the presence of the cards in both cases supports that."

"So why'd he toss him out the window?"

"This is just my opinion," Cooper said, "but I think he did it for fun."

TWENTY-FIVE

Jimmy had told the truth to the detectives about one thing: he was hungry. He hadn't eaten much at the Buffet because they'd been talking so much. Also, watching Vic shovel in his food had really killed his appetite. But he didn't want to go to any of the restaurants that were open late. Chances were, they'd be full of poker players. He decided to go to his room and order room service.

He raided the honor bar for a small bottle of bourbon and a five-dollar bottle of soda, made himself a drink, then studied the room service menu. There was a knock on his door just ten minutes after he had ordered a prime rib sandwich and French fries. He was impressed with the speed of room service until he opened the door and saw Sabine standing there, holding a bottle of wine.

"I want a drink," she said. "But I do not want to drink alone."

"Lots of people in the bar."

She made a face.

"Too many tourists. I would rather share it here with you. That way I will not drink the whole zing."

He swung his door wide.

"Come on in."

She entered and he closed the door behind her. As far as he could tell she had already started drinking.

"Is zere a corkscrew in zat honor bar?" she asked, waving the bottle of what looked like white.

"I think there is." He checked. "Yup."

"You do the honors."

She handed him the wine and then sat down on the king-size bed and kicked off her shoes. He decided she had sexy feet.

"What are we drinking to," he asked, applying the corkscrew to the bottle, "or because of?"

"I am about two hands from being eliminated," she said. "I blame zose stupid posse members for getting themselves killed. I know—zat sounds very cold."

He wasn't concerned with it sounding cold. He was listening to her suddenly more-pronounced French accent. She seemed to have lost her th's.

"Shit," she said, and managed to get a French accent into that.

"What?" he asked, as the cork popped out of the bottle.

"I am tired," she said. "When I am tired my accent becomes—how do you say—more pronounced?"

"That's how you say it."

He retrieved two glasses from the large breakfront that housed the honor bar and poured wine into both.

"Shall I go and get some ice?" he asked, handing her a glass.

"No, zis is fine."

"How about food? I ordered something from room service. I could call them again."

"No," she said, "but do you mind if I stay while you eat?"

"No, I don't mind at all."

She sipped her wine and closed her eyes. Sitting there like that she was like the dream most men have while they're in prison. At least, the way the dream started. For just a moment he was

unsure about where to sit, then thought, the hell with it and sat next to her. She didn't jump up or even move. Her perfume, which he did not remember having smelled before, was light and fresh. It was obviously not meant to be sexy, but under the circumstances, it was.

The whole damn situation was, and she damn well had to know it.

They sat there silently for a few moments, sipping wine, and then she turned her head toward him and put her hand on his thigh. He kissed her and as her mouth opened to him he tasted Sabine and wine, a heady mixture. It might have gone further, but at that moment there was a knock on the door. Had to be room service this time, and they actually were quick.

He considered ignoring it, but she said, "You should probably get that."

"Yeah," he said, and grudgingly went to the door to admit the bellman, who was carrying a covered tray.

"Good evening," the middle-aged man said, and between the "good" and the "evening" it became obvious that he was French. For the next few minutes he and Sabine carried on a rapid-fire conversation that went completely over Jimmy's head.

"Tip him well," she told Jimmy. "I haven't spoken zis much French in many months."

Jimmy tipped well and the bellman left very happy.

"Oh," Sabine said then, "zat smells so good."

"Prime rib sandwich and fries," Jimmy told her. "I'll share it with you."

"Ooh, *pomme frites,*" she said. "You are very generous."

They pulled two chairs over to the desk, and Jimmy split his sandwich and handed her half. They got as much ketchup as

they could out of the small, silly, sealed jar the hotel supplied and sat there munching and talking about the day's play.

Sabine felt she had misplayed several hands because her concentration was not what it should have been. Jimmy told her he'd had the same problem, though apparently not to the same extent it had had on her chip supply.

He kept pouring the wine until the bottle was empty, and then set the dead soldier on the table with the empty plate. They had a small amount of wine left in their glasses, and he was wondering if, when that was gone, they would go back to what they were doing before the bellman appeared at the door.

"Tell me about ze—the—girl," she said.

"What girl?"

"The one you are—how do you—ah, tutoring? Is that correct?"

"Ah, Kat," Jimmy said. "Yes, I'm coaching her. Tutoring, coaching, it's about the same thing."

"Is she good?"

"Very good."

"And so young," Sabine said. "Is she your—I mean, are you and she . . ."

"No, no," he said quickly, "nothing like that. It's all about the game."

"Yes, it is zat way with me and Dallas Jack."

"What? Dallas Jack?"

"*Oui.* Very few people know that Dallas Jack found me on the streets of Paris, doing—how do you say—con?"

"You were . . . a con woman?"

"*Oui,*" she said, "only I was more a con child. You see, I come from a family of gypsies and learned when I was very young the different ways to break ze law and live on ze street."

So what Mike Sexton had told him about her was right.

"Do you now think me . . . horrible?"

"Hey," he said, with a shrug, "everybody's got to make a living somehow."

She smiled lazily. "You are a sweet man."

She was wearing a burgundy blouse, and somehow the top two buttons had come undone, showing a soft swell of breasts.

"Thank you for sharing your dinner wiz me," Sabine said. "I did not know how hungry I was."

"It wasn't my dinner," he said, "just a snack."

They were sitting next to each other on the bed again. He reached out with his right hand and touched a tendril of her brown hair that was lying over her shoulder, unlike the rest which was pinned up.

"Well, you were generous, anyway."

"You're welcome."

He touched her neck, felt her pulse beneath the smooth, warm skin.

"I should go back to my room now," she said. "I'm tired."

"So am I."

She didn't move. He slid his finger down her throat until it was touching the space between her breasts. She still didn't move, but her breathing got faster.

"I will need to be well rested if I am going to, uh—"

"I know." He leaned in and kissed the side of her neck. He felt her shiver. He undid a third button on her blouse and then a fourth. Her bra had lace on it, was cream colored. If she had come there to seduce him, she would have worn a black one—or had that much changed since he'd gone inside?

He'd been with a few women since his release, but no one special. In fact, the first one had been a high-priced call girl.

He'd made the call, and she had come to his condo. He'd really done it just to get the first time over with. He'd fumbled and she'd helped him, whispering to him that it would be all right while she removed first his clothes and then hers. She'd been very good. They had sex twice that night, and the second time he'd been more self-assured.

Now he pulled the tails of Sabine's blouse out from the waistband of her skirt. She didn't resist as he kissed her neck again, then the hollow of her throat, and then the slopes of her breasts.

After the call girl, his next time had been with a girl he picked up in a bar. She was the first girl he undressed after getting out, and he had been so clumsy with the hooks on the back of her bra that she'd laughed and undid them for him.

There was no fumbling with Sabine's bra as she was wearing one that fastened in front. Goose bumps appeared on her flesh as he undid the clasp. Her breasts were small but firm and round, with pink nipples and wide areolas. He kissed her there, first one tip, then the other, and a small moan escaped from her lips.

"I did not . . . plan this . . ." she said softly.

"I know," he said, "neither did I—but look at it this way. If there's another murder tonight, we both have alibis."

He felt her stiffen. He would have taken the words back if he could.

"I mean—"

She sprang up to her feet and hastily redid the clasp of her bra.

"That was a stupid thing to say," he told her.

"Yes, it was."

"I didn't mean—"

She hurriedly did up the buttons of her blouse, but did not tuck it back into her skirt.

"I am sorry," she said. "This was a mistake. Please forgive me."

She rushed for the door as he said, "No, you have to forgive—" but she opened it and hastened into the hall.

He sat there with a raging erection, not knowing if he felt more stupid or frustrated.

TWENTY-SIX

Jimmy woke the next morning feeling more foolish than stupid, but still frustrated. It didn't help that everything in the room seemed to smell of Sabine. But the maids would take care of that once he left.

He showered, shaved, getting ready to go downstairs for some breakfast. His plan when he saw Sabine was to simply smile and greet her. What he'd said last night had been a joke, and he felt her reaction had been a bit excessive. Of course, maybe she had just felt that things had gone too far—or far enough. The wine may have gone to her head. It did that to some people when they were tired. Maybe she'd be embarrassed by what had happened.

She was a beautiful woman. He'd dreamed about her that night, and in the dream that bra had come off and stayed off. The problem was, in the dream as he was sitting at her table, playing in the tournament, she was topless. And everyone in the room knew she had walked out on him. Then Mike Sexton grew irate and flipped over a poker table with one hand. Turned out he had Arnold Schwarzenegger–type strength. Then Skippy the dummy whipped his head around and held up a Picasso flop right in his face, then Tabby, the cheerful Thai man, appeared with his glass of wine and said, "Don't worry, life short, have good time."

Jimmy had woken with a start. Rather than analyze the

dream, he chose to deal with the problem in real life. Last night may have been a mistake on some level, but he was hoping for an opportunity to make it work.

To get his mind off the fiasco, he picked up the phone and dialed Mike Sexton's cell.

"Oh, good morning, Jimmy," Sexton said.

Jimmy was relieved that Sexton's voice sounded like the friendly, benign Mike of old.

"What have you got for me, Mike?" Jimmy asked. "Tell me something I don't already know."

"Well, my boss, Steve, asked the Vegas police if they could supply bodyguards for the remaining members of the posse."

"Not gonna happen," Jimmy predicted.

"You got that right," Sexton said. "The detective said they don't have the manpower to do that and suggested the WPT hire bodyguards for them if they're that concerned."

"Why the hell wouldn't they be that concerned?" Jimmy asked. "Two of them are dead."

"The police suggested we close down the tournament."

"They don't really want you to do that," Jimmy said. "The game is keeping everyone around, including the killer."

"You think the killer is playin' in the game?"

"No," Jimmy said, "but his targets are. Close down the game and he'll either split or take them out somewhere else if he's still intent on doing it."

"Why would he be doin' this?" Sexton asked. "They're just kids."

"That's something you can ask him after he's caught, Mike."

"What about you?" Sexton asked. "You got anything to tell me that I don't know?"

Unbidden, the sight of Sabine's bare, lovely, pink-tipped breasts sprang into his head.

"Nothing I want to share right now, Mike. I'll talk to you later."

He took the elevator down to the main floor, hoping that no one had been killed during the night and that no one would fall into his morning muffin.

It was 9 A.M. by the time he finished his muffin and coffee at Palio. He'd seen quite a few of the remaining participants but had done nothing but exchange a hello or nod with them. Many of them knew him from seeing him around the past three days, but he was still pretty much an unknown to most of the players. As an older couple, who were poker tourists from the gallery, was leaving he overheard them saying that movie star Tobey Maguire—a world-class poker player himself—had been knocked out late last night. Yeah, Hollywood really had invaded the poker world. It was good for everyone.

He was about to get up and leave the café when three young guys in T-shirts came to the table next to him and sat down with their various versions of breakfast. The thing that interested him was that he recognized them as players. They were the same age as the posse players, but he didn't know if they were members or not. He decided to nurse the remnants of his coffee and eavesdrop a little.

The discussion was about poker at first, and Jimmy discovered that all three of these young guys had been knocked out of the tournament by the second day. But they were staying around

to see who the winner would be. And because "all kinds of shit" was going on.

"You mean like the murders?" one of them said. He was wearing a solid red T-shirt.

"Hell, yeah," the second said. "Those posse guys are droppin' like flies." He was wearing a T-shirt with a TI on it, the logo for the new and improved Treasure Island Casino.

"You ask me," the third one said, "somebody did us all a favor takin' out that prick Bennett." He was wearing a WPT shirt.

"You know who I think killed Bennett?" WPT asked.

"Who?" Red Shirt asked.

"That queer Lenny Krieger."

"Well," Red Shirt said, "takes one to kill one."

"Hey, that ain't right," TI shirt said. "Talkin' about the dead like that."

The other two ignored him.

"You really think Lenny killed him?"

"He hated him enough," WPT shirt said. "He's had a crush on him for a long time, and Tim kept rejecting him."

"Also rejected him from joinin' the posse," Red Shirt said.

"Don't know which pissed Lenny off more," WPT shirt said.

"You guys suck, you know it?" TI shirt said. "You're gonna start rumors and get somebody in trouble."

"Lighten up," Red Shirt said. "Somebody's already in trouble, ya know? There's two dead bodies. Besides, I don't think Lenny Krieger could throw a guy through a window."

"Man, that sounds like it was cool," WPT shirt said. "I wish I'd been at the pool to see that."

Jimmy wanted to lean over and say, Believe me, no you don't, but he'd had enough.

"Hey, man, I was there. You can see worse on *Grand Theft Auto,*" Red Shirt said.

These three weren't worth the time he was wasting. He stood up and left the café, having gleaned nothing from them but a distaste for the younger generation.

Still, it might not hurt to have a talk with Lenny Krieger.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Jimmy entered the casino with some trepidation, waiting to hear word of another murder. All he heard, however, were the bells and whistles of the slots. He checked his watch, saw that he still had two hours before start time for day four. He decided to get out of the Bellagio for a while, go over to the Mandalay Bay. Not only would the air do him good but talking to Francisco for a while would be a breath of fresh air as well.

Walking through the high-tech hotel lobby and casino floor, reading the signs directing patrons to the waterfall or the Shark Reef, he decided that when the tournament was over—and the killer was caught, hopefully—he was going to go down to the Riviera and then down to Fremont Street to Binion's and the Golden Nugget, or even Arizona Charlie's on Decatur, for a taste of old Vegas.

When he reached the Race & Sports Book, Francisco was right there in the middle of a group of men, all arguing about who was better, Florida- or California-bred Thoroughbreds.

"The Sunshine Millions at Gulfstream Park don't mean a damn thing," a man argued. "That's only eight races on one day."

"So whadda wanna do—keep track of the whole year?" another man asked. "Two years? Ten?"

Sometimes Jimmy wondered about the persona of the horse-

player. Poker players varied in size and shape and, most notably, dress. But the serious horseplayers Jimmy remembered from the clubhouses and grandstands of his youth—even the ones he was looking at now—all seemed to be the same type: cigars, loud shirts worn out over their big bellies, and sunglasses. Whenever he'd sneak away from school or work for a day at Keystone Park—which later became Philadelphia Park—or even Monmouth, there they'd be, always arguing.

A sexy waitress leaned over with a huge tray of hot food. Pastrami sandwiches, Reubens, hot dogs, and so on. The three cronies grabbed for the food like pirates.

Francisco was looking up at the bickering men from his wheelchair; but when he noticed Jimmy, he turned the chair abruptly and wheeled himself over, his arms working the wheels speedily. Jimmy wondered why the man didn't use some of that money his family sent him to get an electric wheelchair.

"My friend, you are back!" Francisco's voiced boomed. Once again he shook Jimmy's hand in a powerful greeting.

"Just needed to get out for a bit," he said, looking down at his friend.

All of a sudden, out of the corner of his eye, Francisco saw something he didn't like. He snapped.

"What are you doing, Red? Put that Reuben down, you fucking buffoon!" His crony, who was just about to take a huge bite out of his sandwich, stopped suddenly, looking guilty. "You know you're not supposed to eat that."

He looked back at Jimmy.

"Ah, my associate. I've got a fifty-thousand-dollar weight bet against Dallas Jack that comes up in two weeks. My friend here has to lose twelve pounds, and there he is, stuffing his face."

Francisco turned back to his associate. "Eat the grapes. There's yogurt and cheese."

His fat friend nodded as he sheepishly put down the sandwich.

"You're still making side bets, huh?"

"What else is there in life?"

Jimmy hadn't noticed before how much gray had crept into Francisco's beard, although his hair was still as black as ever. Oddly, Jimmy wondered if this gregarious, always-frank man dyed his hair.

"I have heard that things are bad over there," Francisco said, nodding gravely toward the Bellagio.

"What else have you heard, Francisco?" Jimmy asked. "You have your ear to the ground—you usually hear everything. Any idea what's going on?"

"Well, to me it sounds like someone has finally gotten fed up with those young wannabe poker players and is picking them off one by one." Francisco made a pistol out of his thick fingers and went, "Pop, pop, pop."

"Well," Jimmy said, "only two pops so far, but, yeah, essentially that's it. You haven't heard anything else?"

The man shrugged. "What else would I have heard?" he asked. "The Great Francisco is here, always."

"Come on, don't kid a kidder, Francisco," Jimmy said. "You've got eyes and ears all over this town."

"Yes, it is true," Francisco said, "but they are listening for things that interest only me, things I can use to my benefit when making a bet."

Francisco was one of those people who would bet on anything. It was his life, and he was always looking for an angle. But it was also apparently the reason he was in a wheelchair.

"Tell me," Francisco asked, "can you believe those yuppie kids are getting killed . . . but you know they have ruined the game of poker. They are like an infestation. Cocky college kids picking up on our game, making millions with their own sites."

"That's pretty harsh, Francisco," Jimmy said. "I've heard some people say these young players are the reason poker has become so big."

"Come, Jimmy, you know," Francisco said, warming to his subject, "we played poker in back rooms among men!" He emphasized the word "men." "You were there, my friend."

"Yes, I was."

"See? Then you know." Francisco looked very happy. "Life is strange." He always spoke his mind and never took anything back. "I must go. The East Coast races, you know."

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I know. Thanks, Francisco."

Francisco turned his chair but arrested the movement mid-turn.

"Take my advice, my friend."

"And that is?"

"Do not get yourself involved in this business," the other man said gravely. "Concentrate on your poker. You will be happier that way. You and your policeman friend should not play detective anymore."

He completed his turn and moved away quickly before Jimmy could ask him what he meant.

"Fruit plate! Give him a fucking fruit plate!" he screamed.

As Jimmy left the Mandalay Bay to return to the Bellagio, something was nagging at him, the kind of thing that tickled the back of his brain until something jarred it loose with an aha!

The kind of thing that would drive him crazy if he let it.

♣

The first person Jimmy saw that he recognized when he reentered the Bellagio was Vic Porcelli's wife. It took him a minute, but he managed to dredge up her name—Margaret.

He prepared himself to have a conversation with her, but it wasn't necessary. She plowed right past him and, as he watched, rushed over to an obviously predetermined penny slot machine at a bank of machines called Hot Penny. She wasted no time feeding a bill into the hungry machine from her fanny pack—lime green, matching her jogging suit—and began pressing the lighted buttons. Why did middle-aged women wear jogging suits? He'd seen more of them since his arrival in Vegas than he cared to count.

He left her to her pennies and headed for the poker room. When he got there he could hear the voice of Linda Johnson—also known as the first lady of poker—on the microphone. She did most of the announcing for WPT events.

There were uniformed cops standing around, too, which almost made him feel like he was in an armed camp. But they were so outnumbered he wondered what would happen if some of the players just decided to leave. Maybe even the killer. Could he simply walk out and never look back?

He looked around for Kat, found her talking to a couple of other players who were too old to be posse members. People were also gathering in the gallery where they could watch the day's action. It was not yet the final day, so there were no TV cameras around, and Mike Sexton was not going to have to work today.

He walked over toward Kat, who excused herself from the

two men she was talking to and turned to meet him, a delighted look on her face.

"Do you know who they are?" she asked.

Jimmy took another look. Both of them seemed familiar, but he couldn't place them. And he knew she'd take him to task for that.

"Sorry," he said.

"The cute one with the chin spinach is Antonio Esfandiari. He's a poker millionaire. The other one is Mark Seif. These guys are the real deal, Jimmy! And they like the way I play."

"That's great."

"Which means they like the way you play, because you taught me, dude."

"I didn't teach you, kid," he said. "You knew how to play when we met. I just helped—"

Jimmy stopped himself when he noticed Kat's eyelashes. They were fake and oversized. He pointed to them.

"Hey, they look . . . hot."

"You think so? Must be workin'"—she gestured at Antonio and Mark. "Anyway, here I am on day four."

"Well, just keep playing like you're playing and maybe you'll make it to day five."

"We haven't talked about how we're in the money! Both of us! That's so cool."

"Yeah, well," Jimmy said, "there has been some other stuff going on." He didn't want to admit he hadn't realized they were down to fifty players already.

"I know, dude," she said. "That's what I mean. Even with all that, look how well we're doin'."

"Don't get carried away, Kat," Jimmy said. "Stick to your game."

"I will," she promised. "I'll have to. I'm at a tough table, now. I've got about thirty thousand in chips. Who's at your table?"

"I'm not sure," he said, "but they're all loaded now."

"This is so awesome!" she said. "I'm used to watching these guys play on TV, and now I'm here!"

"And you're hyperventilating," he said. "Chill out."

"Okay, yeah," she said. "You're right. You find out anything about those murders?"

"No," Jimmy said. "The cops figure they're connected, but that's obvious because of the cards."

"The Picasso flop you told me about? What could that mean? Why put those cards in the dead men's pockets?"

"I don't know, kid," Jimmy said. "The cops are going to have to figure that one out."

"You're a smart guy, dude," she said. "I bet you can figure it out."

Linda Johnson's voice rang out like a call to the post at the racetrack.

"It's time," he said. "Remember, don't be so impressed at the table. Keep your cool, play your game. And good luck."

"You, too, Jimmy. You're aces, old man." Impulsively, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I can't thank you enough."

In all the time they'd spent together that was the first time she'd ever kissed him. It was a nice gesture, but it also meant she was so excited she didn't care if the cops saw her kissing him.

Maybe too excited.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Jimmy couldn't spot Sabine Chevalier among the players, even though the sheer numbers had been whittled down quite a bit. He hoped she wasn't so embarrassed by what happened the night before that she wouldn't even come down.

He purposely waited until most of the players were seated in the hopes of catching her, but finally he gave up. If she was coming down, she was coming late. He was about to take his own seat when he heard his name. Turning, he saw Vic Porcelli coming toward him. He was once again clad in jeans and a loud shirt, this one red and purple.

"Thanks," Jimmy said, as Vic reached him.

"For what? I ain't told you nothin' yet."

Jimmy had to admit he had trouble picturing the man wearing a captain's shield and commanding men, but that was judging a book by its cover big-time.

"The shirt," he said. "I needed something to wake me up."

"Hardy har," Vic said. "Listen, I love these shirts, and my vacation is the only time I get to wear them."

Jimmy was glad he hadn't seen Margaret Porcelli in her lime-green jogging suit alongside her husband. It would have been too much.

"You got something for me, Vic?"

"I got good news," Vic said. "Nobody got killed last night."

"Yeah, I figured that out."

"Maybe the guy has stopped," Vic said. "Maybe he was only after those two."

"What about the other four?" Jimmy asked. "Are they still in the game?"

"I checked that out," Vic said. "Two are out, two are in."

"And the two who are out? Were they smart enough to leave?"

"Cops won't let 'em."

"Why would they keep them here if they're in danger and they can't protect them?"

Vic gave Jimmy a look and said, "Bait, maybe."

"Christ," Jimmy said. "Are they willing to sacrifice another one to catch the guy?"

"These are Vegas cops," Vic said. "I can't answer that one."

"What about Philly cops?"

"My guys? My gold shields would sacrifice their mothers to catch a killer."

"So these guys are different?"

Vic laughed. "Man, when it comes right down to it, I guess cops are cops no matter where you are."

"The detective in charge, Cooper? He seems all right to me."

"That's the black guy, right? Yeah, he is okay. That other one with the funny name—Andy Devine?—he's a real prick though. Stay away from him."

"Vic, did you talk to the other posse members?"

"I talked with the two who were knocked out of the tournament," he said. "They're scared. I think the two of them have moved into one room."

"That makes sense, I guess."

"Except for one thing," Vic said.

"What's that?"

"They may have made it easier for the killer to find the two of them at one time."

Jimmy realized he was right. The man who had thrown Jesse Dell through a window would not be stopped by even two posse members acting together.

"Look, you play your game," Vic said. "I'll keep nosin' around."

"Okay."

"And concentrate, will ya?" Vic added. "I asked around. There's a helluva lot of money ridin' on this thing."

"Don't I know it."

"You put up fifteen grand to play in this game?"

"I did."

"You got that kind of dough to just toss around, huh?" Vic asked.

"Vic, I've made that back already, and more, by lasting this long."

"Really? It ain't, like winner take all?"

"No," Jimmy said. "There's a prize structure, a sliding scale. Sometimes goes down to sixty, eighty people, sometimes more."

"So you don't have to win the whole shebang to make money?"

"No."

"And you can make a livin' that way?"

"If you finish in the money with regularity," Jimmy said, "you can make a pretty good living, yeah."

"Man," Vic said, shaking his head. "I guess I'm in the wrong racket."

"Vic," Jimmy said, "I get the feeling you're in just the racket you are supposed to be in."

Vic smiled. "You know, your dad said he thought I was a natural when he first met me. I guess he was right, and so are you. So go on, go back to your game. You do what you do, and I'll do what I do."

Jimmy watched Vic walk away, then turned to go to his table. As he did he came face-to-face with Sabine, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Sheepishly, she smiled.

"I want to say . . . I am sorry about last night. I was . . . tired and upset."

"No, I'm sorry," he said. "I took advantage—"

"No, no," she said hurriedly. "You did not do anything I did not want you to do. It's just that . . . when you mentioned alibis . . . I thought about the murders and . . ."

"The moment passed?"

She smiled. "Yes. You do understand."

"Yeah, I do. It's okay," he said. "Maybe there'll be another moment?"

"Yes," she said, "yes, perhaps."

They stood, an awkward silence between them.

"I must get to my table," she said. "I have enough chips for one or two hands. I may have to go all in on the first decent hand I get."

"All you need to do is double up a few times, and you could be right back in it. Just try to put everything else out of your mind. You're no longer under suspicion, so the murders shouldn't concern you."

"I understand that," she said. "Really, I do. But . . . I keep seeing that man falling into the pool. . . ."

"I know," he said. "I see it, too."

She put her hand on his arm, then slid it down to take his hand and squeeze it.

"Good luck," she said, and went to sit at her table. He watched her walk, had a brief picture of her in his mind the way she had looked the night before, then shook his head to dispel it.

As he walked to his own table he wondered if she had wished him good luck in the game or in something else.

TWENTY-NINE

Vic was truly grateful to Jimmy Spain for giving him something to do. Margaret had been bitching at him ever since they arrived about losing money while she—somehow—kept hitting those silly penny slot machines. The only kind of gambling he really liked was blackjack, but when the cards started running bad, he had to quit. It was too damned frustrating. And once he quit he needed something else to do, something that would cost no more money.

Jimmy had given him that.

He couldn't believe it when he'd seen Jimmy Spain in the casino. After all, he hadn't seen the kid since he was a teenager. But once he convinced himself he was right, he had to approach him. After all, he wouldn't have a career if it wasn't for Frank Spain, the best cop he ever knew. That was why it bothered him when the kid blew him off. But when he came back and asked for help, it never occurred to Vic to say no—especially not after he'd offered them a comped suite at the Bellagio!

Yeah, but, he woulda helped the kid anyway . . . or so he liked to believe.

Vic's specialty was interrogation. That's why he decided to try to catch the two eliminated posse players in their room, to see what he could get out of them. It didn't sit right with him that two members of the group could get killed without the others

knowing something. One, maybe that could be personal, but two? No, the others had to have some inkling of what was going on.

The elevator opened onto an empty fifteenth-floor hallway. He went the wrong way first before checking the numbers on the wall. He was glad Margaret wasn't with him. She always stood back with folded arms while he went the wrong way, waiting for him to return with that look on her face—the one that made him understand the existence of domestic violence.

When he reached the correct room number—1516, given him by a desk clerk who hadn't looked very closely at his Philly police shield and ID—he knocked on the door. There was no answer, so he knocked again. It was only because he had gone the wrong way first that he recalled having seen a maid's cart down the other hallway. He retraced his steps and used both his shield and a twenty-dollar bill to pry her master key card from her. He promised to return it before she finished cleaning the three rooms, the doors to which she already had ajar. He left her standing in the hall, looking very uncomfortable.

Vic went back to room 1516 and prepared to use the card on the lock. He knew if he was caught by the Vegas cops his Philly shield would cut him no slack, but if he was going to investigate for Jimmy, then he had to take advantage of every opportunity.

Also, he had been sitting behind a desk for so long as a captain that he was getting a rush out of all this legwork.

He slid the key card into the lock and when the light turned green he turned the handle and pushed. As soon as the door opened he knew something was wrong. He could smell it. He reached for his hip, where his gun would have been if this had been Philadelphia, but came away empty. He knew he should close the door and walk away and put in an anonymous call

to 911, but it wasn't in him. Something was wrong inside and somebody need help.

At least, that's what he told himself as he opened the door and stepped inside. Three steps in and he saw the bloody bodies, one on each bed. He only had time to register that their throats had been cut before something heavy hit him on the back of the head. . . .

THIRTY

Mr. Spain?"

It was a conspiracy, he thought. Any time he built up any kind of momentum they came for him.

Slowly he turned to look over his shoulder at the man behind him.

"Sir, if you'll come with me?"

It was the same man they had sent for him last time. Maybe they thought a familiar face would soften the blow.

"We'll take care of your chips, sir."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, standing up, "I know."

As he was being led away he heard one of the players asking, "Why don't they just disqualify that guy? The rest of us are playin' our butts off and he keeps gettin' breaks."

Always one in every crowd, Jimmy thought.

The tournament director was waiting for him this time and led him to Detectives Cooper and Devine, standing just off the casino floor.

"Spare me," Jimmy said to Devine before the man could speak. "My ass is yours."

"Smart fucker," Devine said.

"Would you come with us, Mr. Spain?" Cooper asked.

"Where? Downtown?"

"Right here in the hotel," the black detective assured him.

Jimmy stared at the man, then said, "Aw, don't tell me . . . another one?"

Cooper held up two alarmingly long fingers and said, "Two."

"If you have two more bodies," Jimmy said, "why do you need me? I thought I was in the clear after the thing with the pool?"

"You've never been in the clear with me," Devine said, but both Jimmy and the man's partner ignored him.

"We're taking you with us because somebody asked for you," Cooper said.

"What? Is somebody else using me as an alibi?" Jimmy asked.

"Not quite," Cooper said.

They got off at the fifteenth floor, and Jimmy followed Cooper down the hall while Devine walked behind him. He so distrusted the man that his back itched.

Coming up the hall toward them were white-clad men wheeling a gurney. On the gurney was a black plastic body bag, obviously full. The three men had to step aside to let the body go by.

"That the second one?" Cooper asked.

"Yep," one of the men answered.

"The white-haired guy is still in there," the other man said.

"Okay, thanks," the black detective said.

Jimmy's stomach went cold. The only "white-haired guy" he knew of who had anything to do with this was Vic Porcelli.

They reached a room where the door was wide open. There were two uniformed policemen standing there. They nodded at the detectives as they went past. As they entered the room Jimmy saw blood on the bed. Christ, he thought, Vic?

When they were in the room he saw Vic Porcelli, seated on a chair by the window, holding an ice bag to the back of his head. There was a paramedic next to him, packing up his stuff.

"He won't let us take him to the hospital," the paramedic told Cooper.

"That's pretty foolish of you, Captain Porcelli," Cooper said. "You took a nasty hit on the head."

"That's okay," Vic said. "I'm okay." He looked up then and saw that Jimmy was with the detectives. "Hey, kid, sorry. I couldn't let them call Margaret, ya know? She'd have a fit."

"It's okay, Vic."

"So you two know each other," Devine said. "Old buddies, huh?"

Vic looked at Devine and said, "Of course we know each other, asshole. I asked for him, didn't I?"

"Listen, you—" Devine started forward, but Cooper got between him and Vic.

"Vic's first partner on the job was my father," Jimmy said. "That's how we know each other."

"And how did he know you were here?" Cooper asked.

"We ran into each other in the casino a couple of days ago," Jimmy said. "I told him I was playing in this tournament."

"The captain, here, has got a comped suite in this hotel," Devine said. "You know anything about that, hotshot?"

"Yes, I do," Jimmy said. "I got it for him."

"In payment for what?" Cooper asked. "His help in playing detective?"

"Hey, hey," Vic said, "I *am* a detective."

"What about it, Jimmy?" Cooper asked.

Jimmy noticed there was blood on the cloth that was wrapped around the ice bag.

"Hold up," he said to the paramedic before he could leave. "He's going with you."

"He says no," the paramedic said.

"I say yes," Jimmy said. "Vic?"

"I'm fine, kid—"

"I'll take away your comp if you don't go with them," Jimmy threatened.

"Aw, hell—" Vic said. He tried to stand and immediately started to fall. Jimmy moved forward and grabbed his right arm as Cooper grabbed the left.

"I guess he's going with you," Cooper said.

The paramedic turned to another one Jimmy hadn't seen until now. He was standing off to the side with a folded gurney.

"Let's take 'im."

"Right."

Jimmy and Cooper relinquished their hold on Vic and passed him to the paramedics.

"I'll be along in a little while," Jimmy told Vic. Then he said to the paramedics, "His bills are on me."

"Take that up with the hospital," the first one said. "We just treat 'em in the field and transport 'em."

Jimmy watched as the men got Vic strapped to the gurney and then wheeled him out. His mind was racing the whole time. He still didn't know what Vic had told the two detectives, but he was going to play this to the hilt.

"You haven't told us why you got him a comp here, Jimmy," Cooper said.

"I did tell you," Jimmy said. "He's my father's old partner."

"I'm sure your old man will be proud," Devine said snidely.

"He would be," Jimmy said, "if he was still with us."

Cooper gave his partner a disgusted look. Devine went out into the hall with the two uniforms.

"What happened here?" Jimmy asked.

"Two more posse members," Cooper said. "Brouchet and Abrahms. They had their throats cut. Apparently, your father's old partner walked in on the killer."

"What was he doing up here in the first place?"

"He wouldn't say," Cooper said. "Pleaded confusion one minute, said he was all right the next."

"Well, Vic's got a hard head."

"Maybe that's what saved him."

"Wait a minute," Jimmy said. "If he walked in on the killer who had a knife, why didn't he just kill Vic, too?"

"I don't know," Cooper said. "I'm trying to work that out myself. It'd be nice if Captain Porcelli cooperated. I might have to call his superior. Which would probably get him in trouble."

"Let me talk to him," Jimmy said, waiting for Cooper to spring his trap. "He'll cooperate."

"You go to the hospital, tell him I'll be along soon. Get him ready to talk," Cooper said.

Jimmy looked at his watch. He wondered when the WPT would pull him from the tournament.

"I'll take care of it."

He started for the door, then stopped and turned.

"Detective."

"Yeah?"

"There's only two left, you know."

"We hope."

"What do you mean?"

"Who's to say when this killer runs out of these posse members he won't just start in on other players?"

Jimmy left with that sobering thought repeating in his mind.

THIRTY-ONE

Jimmy had to find the tournament director, or somebody from the WPT, even Mike Sexton. Anyone he could to tell that he had to go to the hospital to take care of Vic Porcelli. But when he got down to the first floor he found Vic waiting in the elevator court, a bandage on the back of his head.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jimmy asked.

"I've had worse from slipping in the shower," Vic said.

"People die from slipping in the shower."

"Look, you wanna kick me out of our room here, go ahead, but—"

"Oh, relax," Jimmy said. "I'm not going to kick you out of your room."

"Well . . . good," Vic said. "I got one of the paramedics to examine me and bandage my head. He shone a light in my eyes, says I don't have a concussion, so . . . here I am."

"What happened up there?"

"Come with me to my suite," Vic said. "I've got to change this bloody shirt."

They got back in the elevator, went to Vic's floor, and entered his suite. It was bigger than Jimmy's.

"Have a seat," Vic said. "I'm gonna wash up. Help yourself to the macadamia nuts. I already opened them. They're great."

He grabbed a fresh shirt from a chest of drawers and went

into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar. Jimmy had noticed the rooms had Internet access, and Vic or his wife had a laptop computer set up on the desk.

The water ran in the bathroom and then cut off. Vic came out wearing the clean shirt, a plain one, powder blue, no insignia or writing on it. He was drying his hands on a towel.

"Four murders in four days," Jimmy said to Vic. "What do you make of this, Vic?"

"There's a lot I don't know, Jimmy."

"Based on what you do know."

"Okay," the detective captain said, tossing the towel through the bathroom door. "This is not a serial killer—this is somebody working out something personal."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't *know* that," Vic said. "I don't even know if the Vegas cops think they've got a serial killer. I'm telling you what I *think* based on fact." Vic frowned at him. "Ain't that what you just asked me to do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then don't interrupt me."

"No, sir."

"You wanna pass me the nuts, damn it. I didn't mean for you to eat all of 'em." Then he went on. "This is personal, and by that I don't necessarily mean the victims did something to him. I mean he has a personal reason for killing them. What that reason is I can't even guess."

"So could it be somebody who knows them?" Jimmy asked. "And who they knew?"

"My guess is yes."

"But if it's personal—"

Vic held up his index finger to silence Jimmy.

"Listen to what I'm sayin'," he said, his tone scolding. "His reason is personal. That don't mean he knew them—but I'd say he did."

"Okay. Have you shared this with Detective Cooper?" Jimmy asked.

"No," Vic said, "and after finding me in that room I don't think he's gonna want any help from me. In fact, I may still end up behind bars. Once they realize I didn't go to the hospital they may come for me."

"Vic, I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," the older man said. "I coulda said no, you know?"

"By the way," Jimmy asked, "how did they find you in the room?"

"The maid did," he said. "The one I conned out of her key card. Told her I'd bring it back, and when I didn't, she came looking."

"How did she know what room?"

"I think I told her."

"And how did she get in if you had her key card?"

"She must've had another one."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "okay." He looked at his watch. "I've got to get back to the game—if I'm even still in it."

"Would they do that?" Vic asked. "Kick you out?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know."

"Well, you better get down there then."

"Yeah, right." He started for the door, then stopped. "When do you go home?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Stay out of it until then, Vic," Jimmy said. "And thanks for your help."

"I'd like to help catch the guy," Vic said, "especially after he cracked my skull. I owe him."

"Like you said," Jimmy replied, "the Vegas cops aren't going to be too happy with you. Just get on your plane tomorrow and go home."

"If they'll let me," Vic said. "Meanwhile, you be careful."

"I will."

"You should probably stay out of it, too, you know?" Vic called after him.

"Oh," Jimmy said, frowning, "I know. You're not the only one to tell me that."

♣

Jimmy was waiting for the elevator when Vic came trotting into the court.

"Jimmy. I'll tell you something based on everything I've learned in my career."

"What's that?"

"As involved as you've been in this thing?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sure the killer is gonna turn out to be somebody you've talked to over the past four days," Vic said. "Remember that."

"I will, Vic," Jimmy said. "Thanks."

He got on the elevator, thinking about all the people he had seen and spoken to in the past few days.

He was still thinking about it when he stepped out of the elevator. Suddenly, he was grabbed roughly from behind and run into the wall. Then he was jerked away and pushed, so that he stumbled into the little foyer that housed the pay phones. There was a man there using a phone who looked up startled.

"Get out," Detective Devine told the man.

"But," the man said, "I'm on hold—"

Devine grabbed the receiver from the man's hand and slammed it down.

"Get a goddamned cell phone like the rest of the world!" he shouted. "Now get out of here!"

The man didn't waste any more time. He got out.

"What the hell—" Jimmy started, but Devine cut him off. He grabbed him, turned him, and smashed him into the wall again, then pressed all his weight up against him. Jesus, Jimmy thought, this is turning him on. Jimmy tried to squirm away from the contact, but Devine held him fast.

"I figure you for these killings, Spain," he hissed into Jimmy's ear. "You're big enough, strong enough, arrogant enough, and you've got a motive."

"What's my motive?" Jimmy asked, with his mouth against the wall.

"I don't have that figured out," Devine admitted, "but when I do, you're mine."

"Why don't you play a new tune, Devine?"

The detective pulled him back from the wall, then smashed him into it again, chin first. Jimmy felt the skin split.

"I'm gonna put you away, punk."

"What about the pool?" Jimmy asked. "I was nowhere near the man when he—"

"I ain't figured that out, either, but I will," Devine said. "Maybe you had an accomplice."

"Either fuck me or let me go, Andy."

He felt Devine stiffen, then suddenly the pressure was off him. When he turned around Devine had backed off several steps. He was breathing hard and looking uncomfortable.

"Don't call me Andy," he said finally.

"Think it over, Devine," Jimmy said. "Even without the fact that I was down by the pool when Jesse Dell went through the window, I didn't know any of them. What would my motive be?"

"How the hell do I know?" Devine said. "For all I know you had a bet with somebody. Just know this, Spain. I'm gonna have you, no matter how hard you kiss up to that bla—that bastard Cooper."

With that Devine turned and left Jimmy alone with the pay phones. He took his handkerchief out and held it to his chin. Some blood but not bad. He wouldn't need stitches. Maybe nobody would even ask him about it when he went back to the game.

Jimmy decided he needed to concentrate on the game and let the cops do their job. The only way to stay out of Devine's crosshairs was to stay at the tables, and that was what he intended to do. Let the WPT and the Bellagio, the Travel Channel, and whoever else was interested solve the murders themselves. He was a poker player, not a goddamned detective.

And he was going to play poker.

The cash card. The river of dreams. At last you can fulfill your fate.

—Jimmy Spain

THIRTY-TWO

Jimmy was playing his game but with only half a brain. The other half was thinking about some of the things Devine had said and some of the things he had seen up in that hotel room. He never would have predicted it, but each part of his brain was acting independently, and surprisingly both were doing their job.

Oh, he had to be reminded once or twice that he was in the big or small blind or that he hadn't anted, but that was working to his advantage. Some of the other players were getting annoyed with him, thinking that it was part of his game. But as far as his cards went, he was making the correct plays. It was amazing that he could play so well using only 50 percent, and no one knew it.

The other 50 percent was processing things said to him that had eluded him until now. And Devine, smashing him painfully against the wall but somehow giving him valuable information. Big, arrogant, powerful. Who else did those attributes fit?

And then add into the mix what Vic Porcelli had told him—that the killer was probably going to turn out to be someone he'd already spoken with. A picture started to form in his mind—his half a mind.

The picture impossible, improbable, but if true he was safe in concentrating on getting through this day and making it to

the final table. If he was right, nothing else would happen until later that night.

♥

It was several hours after he had returned to the game that he suddenly heard the applause. He expected to see that Doyle Brunson had been eliminated, or even Dallas Jack, but instead he saw the applause was for another player who had just been knocked out of the tournament—Kat Landrigan.

It was at once a nice moment and a terrible one for her. She brushed past him, her shoulders slumped, close to tears.

She was missing the whole point of the moment.

"Excuse me," he said to the table. "A short break."

He rose, unmindful of the looks some of the players were tossing his way, and hurried after Kat.

"Hey," he called, because she was about to break into a run. "Wait up."

She stopped and turned, swiped at her eyes.

"I blew it."

"Did you hear that applause?"

"What?"

"The applause as you left the room."

She frowned. "What applause?"

"If you weren't in such a hurry to get out, you would have noticed the respect they gave you, kid."

"Respect?"

"That's right," he said. "You've got nothing to be ashamed of, Kat. You did great."

Before she could respond, Mike Sexton came over.

"Miss Landrigan?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be willing to do an interview for the WPT?"

"Interview?" she repeated.

"Well, yes," Sexton said. "Seems you're the last woman out. We want to shoot some tape on you, show it during the telecast."

"You mean, like a one-minute feature?"

"Oh, probably more than that," Sexton said.

Jimmy looked at Kat, who gazed back at him, almost glassy eyed.

"Applause?"

"Lots of it." He looked at Sexton. "She'll do it."

"And what about you?" Mike asked.

"What about me?"

"Aren't you, uh, her coach?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Jimmy asked, and walked away.

Initially, Jimmy had thought the interview with Kat was a bad idea. But a very quick second thought told him different. This way, Harold would be able to see for himself that Jimmy was doing what he was supposed to be doing.

They had never discussed how long he would be doing it though. Certainly he wouldn't resign after this tournament. She had acquitted herself extremely well, but that didn't mean she was ready to go out on her own. Not with these wolves.

As for declining his own interview opportunity, he had done that for two reasons. First, he wanted it to be her moment. And second, he still was not quite ready to raise his own profile—although it had definitely been raised as far as the Las Vegas Police Department, the World Poker Tour, and the Travel

Channel were concerned, due to his involvement with the murders as some sort of amateur detective.

But Jimmy had to get back to his own game. They were getting very near having only two tables and, by the end of the night, should be down to the final table. The next day's action would start later, as it would be taped for the WPT show.

Jimmy still had several things nagging at part of his mind, trying to coalesce into something that made sense. But he wanted to try to commit his full attention to making the final table. He wasn't sure he could push everything else completely out of his mind, but murder was going to have to wait until later.

THIRTY-THREE

Jack McClellan called a halt to day four at 11:35 P.M. They were down to six players for the final table. Jimmy had made it, although he was short stacked. And what a final table it was. Some of the greatest and most charismatic players on the tour had gotten there. Tomorrow Mike Sexton would be put to work as he and his cohorts would be working that final, exciting table.

At the table with Jimmy would be pros Antonio "the Magician" Esfandiari; Mike "the Grinder" Mizrachi, three-time WPT tour winner; and Gus Hansen. The last amateur in the game was Jason Read, who had won his way into the tournament playing online in a HollywoodPoker.com tournament. The final player at the table was also a pro, but kind of a surprise to all. It was the always strange but amusing Scooter Thompson, along with his dummy, Skippy.

There were congratulations all around and advice to get a good night's sleep. This would make sense, since the winner would be taking home a whopping 1.8-million-dollar first prize, and Jimmy would have a shot at it. However, something gnawed at Jimmy. He had a suspicion about who was killing posse members, but before he could say anything to the cops, there were still some things he had to find out.

"Jimmy," Kat said, and threw herself into his arms. "I'm so proud of you."

He hugged her back. "Thanks, kid. But what about you? Not disappointed?"

"I was," she said, "but not anymore, dude. There'll be other tournaments, and now I know for damned sure I can play with the pros—thanks to you. What we need to concentrate on now is you winnin' this one."

"Yeah, right."

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Somethin' botherin' you?"

"I'm a little preoccupied."

"Oh, yeah, that's right," she realized, then leaned close to him. "The murders . . . it's so creepy—I'm just trying to blank it out of my mind."

"I know."

Her eyes widened. "You know who it is? The killer?"

"No, I don't," he said. "I have an idea, but—"

"Who? Dude, you gotta tell the cops."

"I'm not going to say anything right now, in case I'm wrong."

"So what are you gonna do? Maybe this isn't safe. Dude, who knows who they could be killing next?"

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm just going to nose around, only this time I've got someplace very specific I want my nose to go."

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Yes, you can. The last two posse members. Do you know their names?"

"I didn't the last time you asked, but I do now. Pete Belton and Mike Flanagan."

"Full-fledged members of the posse?"

"I guess so."

"Any others?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "There were just six."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "I need to find some people. One of them is Mike Sexton. Can you locate him for me?"

"Sure."

"Tell him to come to my room as soon as you do."

He could've called Sexton's cell phone, but he didn't want to waste time. He wanted to find Vic.

"Is that it?"

"No," he said. "After you talk to Sexton, find those other two posse members. Get them to my room also."

"Dude, how am I supposed to do that?"

"Charm them if you have to," he said, "but get them there."

"What're *you* gonna do?"

"I need to find somebody, but I'll be in my room when you get there."

"What's this all about, Jimmy? You ain't gonna do, like, a Monk thing, are you?"

"Monk?"

"Yeah, you know," she said, "Monk, the TV detective. Brings everybody together so he can say 'This is what happened'?"

"Oh, you mean like Columbo."

"Columbo?" She made a face. "Dude, who's that?"

"Kat?"

"Yeah."

"Can you get moving?"

"I'm outta here. Next hand, please, folding like a lean-to."

Spain smiled to himself. Some things never changed.

As she moved away into the casino to find Sexton, Jimmy found a house phone in one of the elevator courts.

"Vic? Did I wake you?"

"I'm watchin' TV and raidin' the honor bar again. The old

lady's downstairs someplace. She found a new penny machine she loves called—what was it?—Hot Hot Penny? Somethin' like that."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," the Philly cop said. "I talked with Cooper and that douche bag Devine, convinced them I was just nosy. They decided not to lock me up for obstruction."

"You're going home tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah," Vic said. "Why? You need somethin'?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "I need your help again."

"I'll be right there, kid."

Jimmy told Vic to meet him in his room, and gave him the number. Then he hurried upstairs to get there before anyone else.

Vic was the first one to arrive. He went right to the honor bar while Jimmy told him what was on his mind.

"That sounds kinda far-fetched. Hey, you didn't eat your almonds."

"Go ahead, they're yours. That's why I need your help, Vic, so I don't make a fool of myself."

"So, what can I do?"

"Two things," Jimmy said. "First, I want you to keep those other two kids from the posse safe."

"Bodyguard? For how long?"

"Until Mike Sexton can arrange for two members of the Bellagio's security force to take over. He should be on his way up here right now, along with the two kids."

"Okay," Vic said. "What's the second thing?"

"I saw a computer in your room. Is it a good one?"

"The best," Vic said. "The department paid for it. Me bein' a captain, they want me to stay in touch. It's wireless and I can get on the Internet like that." He snapped his fingers.

"I need you to check out something medical."

"Medical. You're in luck."

"Why?"

"My old lady, Margaret, was a trauma nurse for years. Just retired last year. She should be able to answer any question you have. And if she don't know the answer, she can find it on the 'Net."

"Hey, that's great!" What an added bonus that the little woman who'd been dragging Vic around was a nurse.

Just then there was a knock at the door.

"Can I get one of these beers in here?" Vic asked, with his head practically inside the honor bar.

"Sure, go ahead," Jimmy said. "This is probably Sexton now."

THIRTY-FOUR

After Jimmy introduced Vic to Mike Sexton, Sexton agreed to talk to his boss, who would talk to the head of security for the Bellagio.

"Don't worry," he said. "Steve'll get somebody up here."

"Good," Jimmy said. "Now all we need is for Kat to get those two guys up here."

"Do you want to tell me who you think the killer is?" Sexton asked.

"Not yet, Mike," Jimmy said. "I may be way off base here. I might just be catching somebody doing something other than murder. I want to be pretty certain before I shoot off my mouth."

"You gonna tell the police?" he asked.

"Once I'm satisfied I'm right," Jimmy said.

"You want a beer?" Vic asked Sexton, reaching into the honor bar.

"Why not?" Sexton said.

Another knock on the door announced Kat's appearance with the posse members in tow.

"Jimmy Spain," she said, "Pete Belton and Mike Flanagan. The last two members of the posse."

"Not even," said the wet-eyed young man, Belton.

"What's that mean?" Jimmy asked.

"We're, like, kinda members," Flanagan said. He had a twitchy right eye that Jimmy wondered about. New, or just this week? "We never got to make, like, any decision or anything. That was all Tim and the others."

"Nobody's gonna wanna kill us," Belton asked, "are they?"

The two young men looked around the room, hoping for a favorable response from somebody.

"We don't know, son," Sexton said, "but why take the chance?"

"Damn cops won't let us leave Vegas," Belton complained. "They want this maniac to try for us."

"Look," Jimmy said, "this is a policeman from Philadelphia. He's here on vacation but has volunteered to help."

Vic lifted his beer in greeting.

"He's going to stay with you until Mr. Sexton, here, can get some security from the Bellagio. He'll keep you safe, and they'll do the same."

"This old dude?" Belton asked dubiously.

"For how long?" Flanagan asked.

"Hopefully," Jimmy said, "this will all be over by tomorrow."

"Hey," Belton said then, "ain't you on the final table?"

"He sure is," Kat said, "and he's gonna win."

"That reminds me," Jimmy said, looking at Sexton. "What time does the final table start, Mike?"

"Five P.M.," Sexton said. "My partner and I will be there to shoot it for the show."

The late starting time would work in Jimmy's favor.

"Where are we gonna do this?" Vic asked. "Their room is too dangerous."

"Mike, can you get another room in the hotel? Registered to no one?"

"I'll talk to Steve," Sexton said. "He can get whatever he wants from the hotel."

"Then see if he can get some security guys to take the job when they're off duty," Jimmy said.

"Who's gonna foot the bill for that?" Sexton asked.

"Hey," Jimmy reminded him, "I'm in this because the WPT asked me, remember? It's the least they could do, don't you think?"

"Right, right," Sexton said. "I'll talk to Steve."

"What do I do, Jimmy?" Kat asked.

"Wait a minute, Kat," he said. "Vic, Mike, why don't you get these boys situated?"

Vic and Sexton put their beer bottles down, and Vic said, "Let's get to it, then." He looked at Jimmy. "How you gonna know where we are?"

"You know," Jimmy said, "it's probably better if I don't know for now."

"Okay," Vic said. "You're callin' the shots. Oh yeah—just give Margaret a call, and she'll help you out with what we talked about. Just, uh, wait till mornin' huh?"

"Okay, Vic. Thanks."

Vic herded Sexton and the two dazed posse members out of the room, leaving Jimmy alone with Kat.

"What's my job?" she asked.

"To stay safe."

"What? Dude, I wanna help."

"You are helping," he told her.

"Jimmy—"

"No arguments, Kat," Jimmy said. "Don't make me put a bodyguard on you, too."

"What about you?" she demanded. "You ain't no detective, and you're no tough guy. Who's gonna look out for you?"

"I'm not going to be in any danger," Jimmy said. "I've just got some questions to ask, that's all."

"Right, right," she said. "That's why you want to keep me safe. Jimmy . . . you gotta let me know what's goin' on."

"Look," he said, not wanting to tell her anything that would lead back to her father, "the WPT just asked me to help out, and Vic was my father's partner at one time. We ran into each other here. I'm just using him to try to do what I can."

"What makes you think you can do something the police can't?"

"Well," he said, "for one thing, the police once suspected you."

"Okay, good point, dude," she said. "They're not all that smart."

"Go back to your room and go to bed."

"What are you gonna do?"

"The same," he said, "but I'm going to get up early so I can do what I have to do and be ready to play."

"Jimmy," she said, "you gotta really concentrate, you know?"

"I know that, Kat."

"I'm gonna be watchin' you," she said. "You start to screw up and I'm gonna let you know."

"That's good," he said. "I'll count on it."

He walked her to the door.

"Who's your biggest competition tomorrow?" she asked, wanting to talk about the game now.

"I don't know," he said. "It's a great table, some of the very best."

"Very best is not the word for it. Esfandiari is like sick. And

the Grinder? Forget it. And what about Gus? This is a whole different level."

Jimmy shot her a look. "Thanks for the pep talk. I'll get their autographs before I bust," he said sarcastically.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but what about that crazy dude with the wooden dummy? He's a freak."

"I've played against him before," Jimmy said. "He's good."

"And the dummy?"

"He's even better," Jimmy said, opening the door and giving her a gentle push. "Good night, Kat. See you in the morning."

"Meet for breakfast?" she asked.

"I don't know if—"

She grabbed the front of his jacket in her fist. "Dude, I'll know you're safe if you meet me for breakfast."

For the first time he realized she was truly worried about him.

"Okay, kid, okay," he said. "We'll meet for breakfast, at Palio. Okay?"

"Nine?"

"Nine's good."

But she didn't release her hold on his jacket yet. She stared right into his eyes.

"Sometimes," she said, "I wish I knew what's really goin' on with you." She yanked on him. "Someday you're gonna have to tell me."

"I will," he promised. "Someday."

She gave him a quick hug and then headed down the hall to the elevators.

Jimmy went back inside and closed the door. He had known for a long time that she was a smart girl. Now he realized she was even smarter than he'd ever given her credit for.

THIRTY-FIVE

Alone in his room, he realized he was too keyed up to sleep. He decided to go down to the casino, take a walk around, try to make sense out of all the things that were jumbled in his mind. He was still trying to put two and two together, thinking back over the past four days to things he'd seen and heard that hadn't registered at the time he'd seen and heard them.

The casino was quieter, less populated than any other time of the day, and yet there was still more activity going on in this town than anywhere else.

He walked past the poker room. With the tournament down to the final table the room was once again home to daily and nightly games, tables populated by tourists, locals, and the occasional pro. Most of the attention was near a high-stakes table where a couple of the high-profile players were holding court. A large group of players were standing around a table where a Vietnamese man with John Gotti bling sat looking nervous yet determined. James Woods beelined up to Jimmy.

"Hey, congratulations on making the final table."

"Thanks. I got lucky. What's going on here?"

Woods smirked, shook his head. "It's classic. Scotty Nguyen has bet fifty grand that he can eat five packets of saltines in less than two minutes. Fuckin' wackos."

Woods briskly walked away to the action. Cash and side bets

exchanging hands. Jimmy stood and watched from a distance. The clock went down, and within one minute Scotty Nguyen was only on his second packet when he started shaking his head and spitting out the remainder on the table. He had lost but was still smiling. The crowd was hooting and hollering, and Jimmy walked away.

Jimmy continued to walk through the casino, occasionally stopping to watch someone playing a slot machine. He came around a corner into a row of nickel slots and saw Margaret Porcelli there, intently pressing the Bet-the-Max button on her machine, something called Jackpot Party. She was wearing her lime-green jogging suit jacket with sequins on the back spelling out CASINO QUEEN. Her concentration was intense, and he started to back away before he disturbed her, then thought better of it. She was, after all, staying at the Bellagio thanks to his largesse. Vic had been doing his part, and he'd said that his wife would help as well. Jimmy needed to tap into her medical expertise and knowledge of computers.

He got close enough to see the readout in red numbers that showed she had over six thousand credits in the machine. Some quick math told him she was sitting on better than three hundred dollars.

He moved closer to her and her machine and watched for a few more moments, hoping she'd notice him. When she didn't, he decided to press the issue.

"Hello, Margaret," he said.

She turned her head quickly to look at him, her eyes wide and glassy. He recognized the slot trance she was in, and gave her a moment to process his face.

"Oh," she said finally, "Mr. Spain. Hello. I, uh, had a message

from Vic saying he was doing something for you tonight, that I, uh, shouldn't wait up."

"Margaret," he said, "you don't have to explain to me why you're down here after midnight playing slots. Vic's already told me how well you've been doing."

"I—I was going to get out of this machine if I got down to three hundred dollars."

"I'd like to leave you to it, I really would," he said, "but Vic told me you were willing to help me out."

She stared at him for a few moments, then said, "Oh, uh, this is about the murders, right?"

"Yes, that's right. I was going to wait until morning to ask you, but . . ."

"Well, I'm not sure what you want from me. . . ."

Briefly, he told her his plan.

"Oh, we can do that now. Just let me cash out of here."

She pressed a button on the machine and a TITO ticket came out with a bar code and the number $304.55 on it. As he watched she opened her wallet and put the ticket inside along with some others. He thought he saw one that had $400 on it.

"That looks like quite a haul," he commented.

"I save them, you see," she told him, "and cash them out later. I'm doing quite well."

"Good for you. I'm sorry to interrupt—"

"No, no, that's okay," she said. "I was only going to play this one machine and then go back to the room. I did very well on it earlier today."

They walked through the casino together to the elevators and went up to her floor. Along the way she told him how grateful she was for the room and all the comps.

"That's silly," he told her. "You and Vic are saving my a—helping me out tremendously."

"Well," she said, sliding her key card in the door and pushing when the green light came on, "I hope I can be of some more help, then."

When they got inside, she said, "Just let me put my purse away." He watched as she actually put it—tickets and all—into the safe each hotel room had.

"Now," she said, turning to face him, "what can I do for you?"

"Vic told me you were a nurse until you retired last year."

"That's right."

"I need to know some medical information."

"What kind?"

"Well, the kind that, uh, may be illegal for me to know. How good are you with that computer?" He nodded his head at the laptop sitting on the desk.

Her eyes lit up as if he'd pointed to a slot machine.

"I'm very good with the Internet."

"That's what I wanted to hear," he said. "How about we get some coffee from room service?"

♥

It took a couple of hours of surfing and hacking, and Jimmy had most of the information he thought he needed. Unfortunately, he still wasn't sure he had the answers he wanted.

By the time they were done, they were both ready to turn in, so Jimmy thanked Margaret for her time and headed for the door.

"Mr. Spain?" she said.

"Jimmy, please."

"Jimmy," she said, "is what you have my Vic doing going to get him in trouble?"

"I hope not."

"Or hurt?"

Jimmy wondered if Vic had told her about the bump on his head yet.

"Never mind," she said, before he could lie. "He's doing what he's supposed to be doing. I know he wasn't having a good time here before we ran into you. We only came here because I wanted to. I guess I should thank you for giving him something to occupy his time."

"You are supposed to check out tomorrow and head home, aren't you, Margaret?"

"Yes. We have a five-fifteen flight."

"Why don't you use your computer to change your flight and stay another couple of days as my guest. Is there any rush to get home?"

"No," she said, "I've got nothing but retirement waiting for me, and the department forced Vic to take two weeks' vacation. The days have been piling up."

"All right, then. I'll have your stay here extended two days, with full comps. And I'll reimburse you whatever it costs to change your ticket."

"Are you doing this because of your father?"

"What about my father?" Jimmy asked, bristling slightly as he always did when the old man was brought up.

"I mean because he and Vic were partners. That was a long time ago."

"Yes, it was," Jimmy said, "but that's only part of the reason. You and Vic have been very helpful at a time when I needed

help. That's worth a lot to me. Good night, Margaret." He bent down to hug the little woman.

"Good night, Jimmy."

He went back to his suite, his pocket filled with notes he'd taken during various Internet searches. He sat on the sofa and spread the papers out on the coffee table. He decided to leave them there until morning, when he'd look at them again. Maybe they'd sort themselves out, fit themselves together like a jigsaw puzzle.

As he got ready for bed he knew that what he was thinking was something the police had never thought about. And why would they? They were busy investigating everyone in the Bellagio. He wondered how Detective Cooper would react when he finally told him his theory. He knew Devine would make trouble, so he'd have to get Cooper by himself. He would definitely need the help of the police if everything came together the way he was thinking it could—the way he hoped it wouldn't.

This was one time he would have preferred to be wrong.

THIRTY-SIX

Jimmy woke at 8 A.M. The notes on the coffee table had not moved themselves during the night. No unseen hand had arranged them in a way that would make perfect sense. That task was still going to be very much up to him.

He showered and dressed quickly, gathered up his notes, and went downstairs to meet Kat for breakfast. He had eight hours ahead of him to do what he had to do in order to be able to play the final table with a clear head.

Kat had gotten there first, and as he approached the table she said, "You look like shit, dude. Don't tell me another murder happened?"

"No, nothing that eventful. I just didn't get too much sleep."

"You're gonna have to rebound, dude," she said. "Maybe you could take a nap later?"

"I don't know, Kat," he said. "I'll see. Let's have something quick for breakfast, okay?"

"Fine with me," she said. "I'm gonna play tourist today and do some sightseeing. I wanna see the Venetian and the Wynn . . ."

She continued to talk while they walked to the counter for coffee and pastries.

When he was able to get a word in edgewise he asked, "Did you see Sabine at all yesterday?"

"Once, I think," she said, "why? You into that broad, Jimmy?"

"She's interesting."

He ate his doughnut and studied Kat. She seemed to have found herself a happy medium as far as her appearance went. All the Goth qualities were still there, but she had on just the right amount of makeup and was wearing a skirt.

"You look nice."

"I had some help," she admitted. "A couple of the other chick players helped me out before I did my WPT interview. They were the nuts."

"Oh? Who?"

"Cloney Gowan and Evelyn Ng."

"Wow," he said, impressed. "If you're going to take advice from anyone on style . . ."

"Yeah, I know. They were cool about it."

After a little more chatter they finished their breakfasts and left Palio.

"I'm headin' out," she told him. "Is there anything you need me to do first?"

"Just go and have a good time, Kat," Jimmy said.

"I can do that."

"And be at the game tonight," he added. "I'll need the moral support."

She smiled and said, "I can definitely do that, dude."

"Then I'll see you there."

They parted company outside Palio. Jimmy was very satisfied with both Kat's level of play and her attitude. She had come a long way in the time they'd been in Vegas, and she had finished in the money. She was dressing in a more feminine style, and the conversation they'd just had had only one poker term in it.

Jimmy went by the poker room to see who was around and was surprised to see Sexton there, talking to a couple of guys. Jimmy thought to himself, This guy gets less sleep than me.

"Hey, Mike."

Sexton turned, saw Jimmy, and excused himself and came over.

"That was the director and one of the cameramen for tonight," he explained.

Jimmy nodded. Perhaps a little too much information, but nevertheless.

"How did it go getting Vic and those guys a room last night?" Jimmy asked.

"No problem," Sexton said. "And I checked in with them this morning. They're all still alive." Sexton chuckled.

A bit odd, Jimmy thought. Perhaps the sleep deprivation was getting to him.

"Listen," Jimmy said, "I need to talk to Vic. Is he in the room with them?"

"No," Sexton said, "it took me until this morning, but I got a couple of off-duty security guys in there."

"So where's Vic?"

"I don't know," Sexton said. "Maybe in his room?"

"I'll check," Jimmy said.

"Are you all set for tonight, Mr. Final Table? You definitely locked up a seat as one of our Bad Boys. 'Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do,' " he started to sing the *Cops* TV theme.

"I hope to be by five o'clock."

Jimmy gave Sexton's shoulder a soft punch, then he walked away, leaving Sexton standing by himself, smiling and singing, "whatcha gonna do when they come for you."

Rather than just go to Vic's room Jimmy decided to use a

house phone to call him. He'd kept Margaret up pretty late, and there was no telling how much sleep Vic had gotten. He was surprised when the Philly cop answered, sounding chipper and very much awake.

"Did I wake you or Margaret?"

"Naw, Margaret went down to hit the slots early, and I been waitin' for your call. What're your plans for today?"

"My plans?"

"Jimmy," Vic said, "I been a cop for a long time, and I know that look."

"What look?"

"The look a cop has when he's got the scent," Vic explained. "You had that look last night. You got the scent."

"I don't want to talk about the scent on the phone," Jimmy said. "Meet me downstairs in front of the elevator that leads out to the Strip. We'll talk about the scent there."

"Okay, kid," Vic said. "See you in a few."

THIRTY-SEVEN

Margaret told me we're staying longer, thanks to you," Vic said. "I appreciate it. It means a lot to her."

"And what about you?"

"I still got a week's vacation," Vic said. "I'm happy to do that here and not at home, mowing the lawn."

They were out on the Strip now, walking in the direction of Caesar's Palace.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?" the older man said.

"What I have on my mind didn't make much sense yesterday."

"And today?"

"Well, after your wife got finished on the computer, it makes even less sense today."

"Keep talkin'."

Jimmy did, outlining his theory in full, hearing it himself for the first time out loud.

"Am I crazy?" he finished.

"I don't think so, Jimmy," Vic said. "Sounds to me like you're actin' on what you've observed, wrapped around a big hunch."

"What would you call that then?"

Vic smiled. "I'd call it sound police work."

They decided to go into Caesar's Palace. The street was packed with people walking to and from the casinos, and it was too hard to talk while trying to dodge them. Several times they almost had one of those huge, souvenir drinks the tourists hauled around spilled on them.

Inside the casino it wasn't much better at that time of day.

"Vegas has gone crazy," Vic said. "I was here once before, years ago, and I don't like the changes very much."

"Same here," Jimmy said.

They were approaching the Sports Book when he heard someone call out, "Hey, Jimmy!" He turned and saw Paulie DiCicca. Now he was in a quandary. How to treat Paulie in front of Vic? What to tell Vic about Paulie?

"Paulie," he said, as the smaller man reached them.

"Whoa," Vic said to Paulie. "What a turtleneck."

"Yeah, thanks, man," Paulie said. "Nice shirt, too."

Vic's Hawaiian shirt today was mostly emerald and azure. Paulie's turtleneck was a startling orange.

"Jimmy, it's time for us to talk."

"Not right now, Paulie," Jimmy said. "I'm showing my friend Captain Porcelli around Caesar's Palace. We were just heading for the Forum Shops."

"Captain?" Paulie repeated. "Like . . . in the army?"

"No," Jimmy said. "Captain of detectives with the Philadelphia police department. Show the man your badge, Vic."

With a bemused look on his face Vic showed his gold and blue shield to Paulie.

"Okay, yeah, I see. Good ta meet ya, man," Paulie said, backing away. "We'll talk later, Jimmy."

Paulie turned and headed right into the Sports Book.

"Okay," Vic said, returning his badge to his pocket, "what was that about?"

"It's nothing, really—"

"It's somethin' when you want to use my buzzer to scare a guy away," Vic said. "Ex-con?"

It took Jimmy a moment to realize Vic was talking about Paulie.

"Yeah . . ."

"And you know him how?"

Jimmy hesitated.

"I think," Vic said carefully, "if I'm gonna help you with . . . all this, I need to know everything."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "maybe we really do need to go into the Forum and have something to drink."

They stopped at the first place they could get a regular cup of coffee. They sat at a wrought-iron table outside the restaurant on what was a replica of an Italian tiled patio.

"Take your time, kid," Vic said. "I get the feelin' you ain't talked about this much."

"Try not at all."

"Not to your family?"

"I don't see my family very much, Vic. I don't get back to Philly very often."

"That's too bad," Vic said. "Family's a pain in the ass most of the time, believe me, I know, but sometimes it's nice to know they're there."

"Look, Vic, I've been away for a while . . ." Jimmy started, and eventually explained the past twelve years to him—the year before he went to prison, the ten years in prison, and the year since he got out.

"The guy I hit was a smart-ass kid who thought two queens

was three queens because he said so," Jimmy explained, "and because of who he was and how much he was worth."

"Who was he?"

"You don't want to know," Jimmy said. "Let's just say he was somebody whose money put me away for a lot longer than I should have been."

He was still holding some things back, like the fact that he did ten years of a minimum-fifteen stretch because of Harold Landrigan. That would have meant explaining about Kat, too.

"Now I know you're a cop, Vic, and everybody you've put away says he's innocent."

"You never told me you were innocent," Vic pointed out. "All you said was you got put away for longer than you should've. I believe you. What's with this Paulie guy?"

"He was my cell mate for about a week," Jimmy said. "He got out a while back and somehow tracked me down here."

"And he's makin' trouble for you?"

"He's trying to."

"Well, the cops have got to know. They must've checked you out."

"They did."

"You gonna be in trouble if the poker people find out you did time?"

"They know already," Jimmy said. "I'm on the final table tonight."

Vic put his coffee cup down before he could spill it.

"You made it?" he asked. "You got a shot at the big money?"

"I've got a shot," Jimmy said, "but I'm short stacked. I'll get back at least a hundred and twenty-five grand."

"That's great!" Vic said. "Congratulations, kid."

"Thanks, but I think I only have a shot if I can play with a clear head."

"So on top of all this murder stuff, you got this ex-con on your case."

The way Vic said "ex-con" it was clear he'd already forgotten that Jimmy was one, too.

"Right."

"You want me to take care of him?"

"I'm more concerned right now with the murder thing," Jimmy said.

"Well, you've seen to it that the last two guys on the hit list are safe."

"That doesn't mean the killer won't pick somebody else," Jimmy said.

"And you're pretty sure about your theory?"

"Like you said, I've got a hunch. But how can I prove it?"

"You've got one of two ways—find some evidence," Vic explained, "or make the guy prove it for you."

"So what next?"

"Well," Vic said, "do you know where the guy lives?"

THIRTY-EIGHT

The apartment house was on Decatur, not exactly what Jimmy had expected.

"You sure this is right?" Vic asked him as they got out of the cab.

"This is the address Margaret got off the Web," Jimmy said.

"Gotta be right, then," Vic said. "She knows what she's doin' on the computer. Unless her source is wrong."

They approached the front door, and Jimmy looked at the mailboxes.

"It's the right place," he said, putting his finger on a name. "Four B."

Vic reached for the front door, found it open.

"This is gonna be easier than we thought—unless he walks in on us."

"Actually," Jimmy said, "that would solve the problem, but I doubt it."

There was an elevator, but Vic recommended they walk up.

"Less chance of running into someone."

When they reached the fourth floor, they could hear a TV blaring *The Price Is Right* and a crying child from another apartment. There were four units on the floor.

When they got to the door Vic said, "Just keep an eye out."

Jimmy looked up and down the short hall while Vic leaned

over the lock and did something with both hands. Jimmy heard a *snick* and the door opened.

"Inside, quick," Vic said.

They both slipped inside and Vic closed the door gently behind them. They could still hear both the TV show and the child through the walls.

"Not what you expected, huh?" Vic asked.

"Not at all."

"Well, it's not very big. One bedroom. Let's take a quick look around."

"What are we looking for?" asked Jimmy.

"We're just lookin'," Vic said. "It should jump up and bite us on the ass."

Jimmy looked around the living room while Vic went into the bedroom. The place was neat, everything seemingly in its place. It didn't have a very lived-in look, more like a hotel room after it'd been cleaned. There were some poker and gambling magazines in a holder, none left out on the coffee table, which had some art books on it.

As Jimmy entered the bedroom, Vic was backing out of the closet.

"What'd you find?" Jimmy asked.

"Shoes," Vic said, "several pairs. What about the living room?"

"Nothing," Jimmy said. "Just some magazines."

"Check those drawers in the table by the bed."

Jimmy found some underwear and a box of condoms, which he showed to Vic.

"Look in the garbage," Vic said. Jimmy did and saw several condom packets, open and empty. Thankfully, there were no used condoms. Those had probably gone down the toilet.

He found something else in the drawer, too.

"Vic?"

Porcelli walked over to stand next to Jimmy and look into the drawer. There were dozens of decks of playing cards. Jimmy took out a deck, went through it, did it with another and a third.

"Paint's gone," he said.

"What?"

"All the picture cards are gone."

"Picasso flop?" Vic asked.

"Any three picture cards would make a Picasso flop."

They looked at each other, then closed the drawer.

"Okay," Vic said. "Let's look at the bathroom and kitchen real quick and then get out of here."

Jimmy followed Vic, watched him go through the medicine chest, the drawers and cabinets in the kitchen.

"Glasses are real clean," he observed, taking one down from a cabinet above the counter.

"There must be a maid."

"In this dump?" Vic replaced the glass. "I doubt it. Come on, we're done here."

Following Vic to the front door Jimmy asked, "Did we find anything?"

"We did," Vic said, "but it's more a case of what we didn't find."

They walked to the corner and managed to flag down a cab back to the Bellagio. Jimmy started to talk in the car, but Vic cut him off with a wave of his hand.

When they were out of the cab and in front of the hotel Vic said, "We don't want anyone rememberin' we were there, not even a cabdriver."

"What do we do now?"

"How long have you got?"

Jimmy checked his watch, saw that he still had better than four hours before start time.

"Okay, let's find Margaret," Vic said. "I've got some questions for her that you probably didn't ask."

As they entered the casino Jimmy said, "How are we going to find her? She could be anywhere."

"She told me she wasn't leaving the Bellagio today," Vic said, "so you check the penny slots, and I'll check the nickels."

It was Jimmy who found her after twenty minutes. She'd gone back to the penny slots. Over her shoulder he saw the readout on the machine reflected that she had fifteen thousand credits—one hundred and fifty dollars. It looked like she'd be there for a while, so Jimmy went and found Vic at the nickel slots and brought him back to her.

"Hey, lady, how you doin'?" Vic said, coming up behind her.

She jumped. "Damn it, Vic!" Then she saw that Jimmy was with him. "Oh, hello, Jimmy." She looked at her husband. "I'm doing okay. What's up with you two?"

"I got a question for you."

"What's that?"

"Sex."

She sighed. "Vic, I told you—"

"No, not us," Vic said, looking embarrassed. "The medical records that Jimmy had you pull?"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be possible for a man in that condition to have sex?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Impotency would be part and parcel of that injury."

"And tell me what I'd find in the medicine chest of someone with that condition."

"Well . . . painkillers, some lotions and salves for his skin so he doesn't get sores . . . that kind of thing."

"Thanks, honey," Vic said, planting a kiss on his wife's gray head. "Go back to your game."

"Thanks, Margaret," Jimmy said.

"Sure, but—"

Vic grabbed Jimmy's arm and pulled him from the aisle before his wife could get her question out.

"Let's get over to the Mandalay Bay," he said. "I want to watch this guy."

They grabbed a cab out in front of the Bellagio. When they got to the Mandalay Bay they made a beeline for the Sports Book, then found a position just outside where they could watch.

"Tell me about this guy," Vic said.

Briefly, Jimmy told the Philly cop what he knew about Francisco Remigio Pareira.

THIRTY-NINE

So what you're tellin' me here is we got a guy who'll bet on anything."

"Right."

"And he bets big money."

"Always."

"Then why is he livin' where he's livin'?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said.

"You said he's your friend."

"I haven't seen him in over twelve years," Jimmy said, "but, yeah, I consider him my friend."

"Come on, take a guess."

"Maybe he's on a losing streak."

"Everybody has a losing steak sometime, right?" Vic asked.

"Yeah, the guy just loves the action. It happens." Jimmy seemed pained, almost depressed. Could this be right? Could Francisco really be responsible for these murders? His head was spinning.

Vic picked up on it.

"Hey, are you all right? You're doin' the right thing. Your dad was the same way."

Somehow that didn't make Jimmy feel better.

"Okay, so let's say he's losin'. Then what?"

"He gets more money from home. They say it's, you know, family money."

"Just like that."

"Usually," Jimmy said, "but wait a minute. I just remembered something."

"Good," Vic said. "Let's have it."

"When I first saw him the other day, he said he was a little short of cash," Jimmy said. "He said . . . he said he wasn't having a good season. Maybe his 'shipment' hasn't come in."

"You think they cut him off."

"Maybe," Jimmy said. "I don't know."

"Is there someone we can ask?"

"I suppose so."

"Okay." Vic was staring straight into the Sports Book. From their vantage point, each sitting in front of a video poker machine, they could see Francisco and his entourage in front of the huge horse screen. "Let's shelve that for now. Let's go over what we've got. What first made you suspicious?"

"Last time I saw him he said I should stop playing detective," Jimmy said. "I never told him I was."

"And that leads you to believe what?"

"That, at some point, he'd been over to the Bellagio and found out what I was doing."

"Not necessarily," Vic said. "He could have simply heard about it. Go on."

"His hands," Jimmy said. "They're not as calloused as you'd think they'd be, especially someone who's been wheelchair bound for years."

"And you know that how?"

"By shaking hands with him."

"And what does that tell you?"

"That he's not in that chair all the time."

"Or," Vic said, "maybe he wears gloves."

"Not when I saw him."

"Maybe he doesn't wear them when he's in the Sports Book."

Vic was shooting down everything Jimmy came up with.

"What else, Jimmy?"

"His shoes," Jimmy said. "I notice they're scuffed, like they've been walked in."

"Maybe they're old shoes," Vic said. "Maybe he's had them since before his injury, and he still wears them."

"So what are you telling me?" Jimmy said. "That everything I've observed is wrong?"

"No, not wrong," Vic said, "just explainable. Come on, what else?"

"Detective Devine told me that they think the killer's big, powerful, and arrogant."

"They can tell he's powerful from the tapes," Vic said. "Arrogant applies to most killers."

"Well, granted, Francisco may not look like a strong guy because he's in that chair, but, believe me, he's strong. In his younger days he played soccer back in Panama. In fact, he got banned for betting."

"That's fine," Vic said, "but one big thing—he's in that fucking wheelchair."

"Or maybe not," Jimmy said.

Vic asked, "Why would a man stay in a wheelchair if he didn't have to?"

"You don't know the mind of a gambler. There's reasons, maybe some type of hustle."

"Like what?"

"A bet," Jimmy said. "A big bet, maybe. I knew a guy once that waited five years and never broke a hundred in golf until

he bet two poker players over half a million that he could break ninety. He won that bet. That's a five-year plan. Shit like this happens."

"This is crazy. You think this guy would bet somebody that he could stay in a wheelchair for what . . . years?"

"He might have bet that he could convince people that he was stuck in that wheelchair. Who knows?"

"And so he did what? Phonied his hospital records?"

"Maybe they were altered."

Vic kept staring at Francisco, then looked at Jimmy. "Okay."

"Oh, that you buy?"

Vic turned in Jimmy's direction.

"It's all plausible," Vic said. "Let's just say that's true. Why the murders?"

Jimmy just shook his head.

"Now let me tell you what we found in his apartment." Vic ticked the points off on his fingers. "You were right about the shoes. He's got others in the closet, and they all look slightly scuffed, either on the bottoms or the toes."

"You explained about the shoes—"

"One pair, maybe," Vic said, "but this guy's got half a dozen pairs. But that's not all. There was nothing in his medicine cabinet that a paraplegic would have. Also, all the glasses in the kitchen are clean."

"What's that mean?"

"They're up high, Jimmy," Vic said. "He washes them and then puts them away. He has to be standin' for that."

"So now you're saying you believe me?" Jimmy asked. "He's not paralyzed?"

"I'm sayin' there's a good possibility he's fakin' it," Vic said, "if everything you say about him is true. If he's on a losin' streak,

then he needs a big bet to get him back on his feet—no pun intended—and this could be it."

"So how do we prove to the police he can walk?" Jimmy asked.

"Jimmy, even if we do prove it," Vic said, "that doesn't make him the killer. That just makes him some nut who will go to great lengths to win a bet. The cops aren't gonna care about that."

"So now you're saying he's not the killer."

"Does he have a motive?"

"Well, maybe he didn't like those guys for some reason. He did tell me he was pissed off about the Internet players coming into the game and ruining it."

"Is he the only one who's pissed about that?"

Jimmy hesitated, then said, "No."

"You need something more personal," Vic said. "Or you need a witness who saw him near one of the scenes."

"So far the only person I know of," Jimmy said, "who's been anywhere near one of the scenes is you."

"Good point," Vic said. "And why didn't he kill me?"

"You didn't see him."

"A killer would err on the safe side," Vic said. "I should be dead."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"I can't," Vic said. "Not yet."

They both turned and looked at Francisco again.

"If he's tryin' to win a bet about the wheelchair," Vic said, "and he needs it bad, why would you want to ruin that for him if he's your friend?"

"I wouldn't," Jimmy said, "but if he's a killer . . ."

"He's your friend," Vic said. "Do you really think he's capable of killin' someone the way these boys have been killed? I

mean, we're talkin' some real anger here. Do you know anyone else who fits the profile—strong and angry—and not tryin' to win a bet about a wheelchair? Somebody with a real personal ax to grind?"

Jimmy thought a moment, then said, "You know, I think I do."

FORTY

They left the Mandalay Bay and went back to the Bellagio. On the way Jimmy told Vic about Lenny Krieger, the wannabe posse member who was also a bodybuilder. Mike Sexton had told Jimmy that Krieger had been wanting to get in for a long time, but the posse—meaning Tim Bennett—would never accept him.

"Big, powerful," Vic said, "and angry. It fits except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Why wouldn't the cops be all over this guy?"

"Maybe they don't know about his motive," Jimmy said. "Maybe they interviewed him and he didn't say anything about constantly being rejected by the posse."

"Somebody else should have mentioned it," Vic said, "One of the posse members."

"How would we know if they had?"

"Well," Vic said, "we have two left who we could ask, don't we?"

"And you know what room they're in."

Vic smiled. "Exactly."

Vic took Jimmy up to the room where they had stashed the two remaining posse members, tended by a couple of off-duty Bellagio security men.

"It's hokey," Vic said, "but we set up a knock."

He executed the secret knock—two quick, three slow—and the door was opened by a big, bald, powerful-looking black man in tan pants and a black T-shirt.

"Yo," he said to Vic. "These dudes were just askin' us to order room service."

Vic looked at Jimmy, who said, "Yeah, sure, no problem."

"But we've got to talk to them first," Vic added.

"You're the boss," the guy said.

"Actually," Vic said, indicating Jimmy, "he's the boss. Jimmy Spain, Calvin Vincent." He jerked his head at a white guy across the room, also big but in a different way. He was thick and apparently didn't spend as much time in the gym as Calvin. "That's Sam Holloway."

Sam just nodded.

Seated on the sofa were the two posse members, Pete Belton and Mike Flanagan. They had video game controllers in their hands and were immersed in a game.

"Poker?" Vic asked Calvin.

"Grand Theft Auto."

"I got next," Sam said.

"We have to talk, guys," Vic announced. "Shut that thing off."

"In a minute, dude," Belton said. "I almost got 'im."

"You guys wanna help catch a killer," Vic asked, "or play fuckin' video games? Your call, considerin' you're next on his list."

That got their attention. Flanagan pressed the pause button, and they put the controllers down.

"Tell us about Lenny Krieger," Vic said.

"What about him?" Belton asked.

"Why wouldn't you let him in the posse?" Jimmy asked.

"He was fuckin' weird, man," Flanagan said. "All those muscles."

"And he's a 'roid junkie," Belton said. "Tim didn't want him around. He thought he might flip out someday—you know?—'roid rage."

"'Roid rage at a poker table?" Jimmy asked.

"Actually," Vic said. "there's no tellin' when somethin' like that will hit. Adds to his motive, in my book. Somebody on steroids probably doesn't even need a motive."

"Motive?" Belton asked. "You think Lenny killed Tim and the others?"

"No way, man," Flanagan said.

"Why not?" Vic asked.

"He doesn't have the balls," Belton said. "Tim always said Lenny had a needle dick and tiny balls, and it showed at the poker table."

"So Tim had a more legitimate reason for keeping Lenny out of the posse?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah, man," Belton said. "The dude can't play."

"No balls," Flanagan said.

"Well," Vic said, "there's always the steroids. They could've given him the balls."

"One time, maybe," Jimmy said. "I think he'd freak out after that, not end up doing it again and again. These murders are premeditated."

"You may be right." Vic addressed the two young men again. "Either one of you talk to the police about Lenny Krieger?"

"I didn't," Belton said. "You?"

"Not me," Flanagan said.

"Did they even ask you who might have a motive for these killings?" Vic asked.

"Yeah," Belton said, "they asked. I said I dunno."

"You?" Vic asked Flanagan.

"Same thing. I don't know who'd want to kill Tim and Jesse and the others. It's crazy, man. No way is there someone out there wants to kill me."

"Me, neither," Belton said.

"We're gonna keep you here a little while longer," Vic said, "just to make sure."

"Are we, like, under arrest or somethin'?" Belton asked.

"No," Vic said, "not at all. In fact, you're free to go if you want."

The two young men exchanged glances, then Belton asked, "You gonna feed us?"

"You can call room service anytime," Jimmy said. "Order anything you want."

"Anything?" Flanagan asked.

"That's right."

They looked at each other again, and then Belton said, "Okay, we'll stay."

"Say," Flanagan said to Jimmy, "ain't you on the final table tonight?"

"That's right."

"Dude, you're gonna have to concentrate."

"Don't I know it," Jimmy said. "Thanks."

"Let 'em order what they want," Vic told the security guys.

"Yeah, okay," Calvin said.

He walked Vic and Jimmy to the door as the two posse members continued their game under the watchful eye of Sam.

"Are we stayin' here overnight?" Calvin asked at the door.

Vic looked at Jimmy, who said, "If it's okay. It'll probably only be for one night."

"Okay," the black man said. "As long as we know. Uh, can we order room service, too?"

"Sure," Jimmy said, "anything you want."

"Thanks."

As they walked to the elevator Vic said, "I don't know what to tell you, kid. Maybe you should go to the detective in charge with this stuff about Lenny Krieger, but that wheelchair stuff?" Vic shook his head. "You might want to think about that."

"I will, Vic," Jimmy said. "And I want to really thank you and Margaret for your help."

"Hey. You're payin' our way. You and her damn penny and nickel slots. We got time to hit the lunch buffet?"

FORTY-ONE

Jimmy did not have time to hit the lunch buffet, but he sent Vic on his way. The Philly cop could not be with him when he talked with the Vegas cops. He and Vic still did not want Detective Cooper to know that Vic was helping him play detective. That would get both of them in trouble.

What Jimmy had to figure out was how to ask Cooper about Lenny Krieger *without* letting him know that Jimmy was indeed playing detective.

But the first step was to locate Cooper. Jimmy felt the detective had to be somewhere in the hotel. He had pretty much covered the casino and was ready to call on Mike Sexton for help when he spotted Detective Cooper standing at the front desk.

As he approached he could hear Cooper saying ". . . sure the maid has been in the room?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk said. "They say the beds were not slept in last night."

Jimmy knew what Cooper was talking about and wanted to turn around and walk the other way. He was too late, though. The detective saw him coming and turned to meet him.

"Mr. Spain," the black detective said. "Just the man I was about to look for."

"Detective Cooper," Jimmy said. "What a coincidence. I was looking for you, too."

"I'm afraid we may have two more dead poker players on our hands," Cooper said, "but we don't know for sure. We have no bodies—dead or alive."

"Detective—"

"We also can't determine whether they've left town or not. We can cover airports and bus depots, but if they got in a car and drove—"

"Detective—"

"We probably will never know. Have you seen either Mike Flanagan or Pete Belton?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Jimmy said. He looked around the busy lobby. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"Why can't we talk here?"

"Because," Jimmy admitted, "what I have to tell you might make you lose your temper and embarrass both of us."

Cooper stared at Jimmy, opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it.

"Okay," he said finally. "I still have use of one of the offices in the back. Follow me."

Jimmy did, down the familiar hall and into the office where they'd spoken before.

"Sit," Cooper said. The detective remained standing, arms folded, glowering at Jimmy.

"Let me tell you something before we start," Cooper said. "I've been straight with you, I've treated you right, I've even tried to protect you from that idiot Devine."

At the mention of Devine's name Jimmy touched the cut on his chin gotten during their last meeting.

Cooper showed Jimmy a long index finger. "Don't tell me you're going to make me sorry and give Devine a chance to say I told you so."

Cooper took a deep breath, then said, "Now go ahead. What do you want to say?"

"I, uh, know where the other two posse members are," Jimmy said.

Cooper's eyes narrowed. "Where?"

"In a room in the hotel."

"Which room?"

"Just a room that's not, uh, registered to anyone."

"And they're alive?"

"Alive and well."

Cooper was silent, and Jimmy thought that the man might well make a good poker payer someday. He could not read his expression.

"Why would they— How did they—" Cooper stopped and started again. "I should haul you in for obstructing."

"Because I kept two young men alive all night?"

"What did you do—sit up with them?"

"Not me," Jimmy said. "A couple of off-duty security guys from the hotel."

"And why would they do that?"

"They're being paid."

"By who?"

"The WPT."

"And what about you?" Cooper asked. "Are you just being a Good Samaritan?"

"I'm also working for the WPT—sort of."

"'Sort of'? What's that mean?"

"It means I'm not being paid."

"Then why do it?"

Jimmy shrugged. "They asked."

Cooper frowned. "You were also coming to the rescue, weren't

you? Getting on your white horse to save the ladies? Both of whom lied about being with you?"

Jimmy hesitated, then said, "Both?"

"Oh, that's right," Cooper said. "You backed Miss Landrigan's story, didn't you?"

Jimmy wondered if the detective was trying to get him to recant and why.

"What does that matter now?"

"You're right," Cooper said. "It doesn't matter." The black man grabbed a chair and sat down. His shoulders slumped. He suddenly looked very weary. "This case is tough. So many suspects and half of them got the wind up after that first day. Plus I get saddled with a moron for a part—" He stopped suddenly, aware that he was talking too much.

"Never mind," he said. "You've got to tell me what room those two boys are in."

"They're still being guarded—"

"Don't worry," Cooper said. "I won't tell anyone else where they are. I just want to talk to them."

Reluctantly Jimmy gave the detective the room number, then added, "There's a secret knock."

"You're kidding."

When he realized Jimmy wasn't kidding he learned the secret knock.

"Anything else I should know?" he asked.

"Well . . ."

"Oh, that's right," Cooper said. "You were looking for me. What's on your mind?"

"I heard something and I didn't know if you had heard it, too."

"About what?"

"A guy named Leonard Krieger. Lenny, they call him."

"Muscle-bound, geeky kind of guy?" Cooper asked.

"That's him," Jimmy said. "Seems he's been wanting to be in the posse for a while, and they kept rejecting him."

"We know that," Cooper said. "Christ, do you think we haven't been doing anything, Jimmy?"

"I'm just trying to help," Jimmy said. "You know about the steroids?"

"You just have to look at the guy to know he's on steroids," Cooper said. "You know, on the one hand I appreciate that you're trying to help, but on the other . . . we're not idiots."

"I know that."

"I hope you do. I—" He was interrupted by his cell phone. He dug it out, flipped it open, and said, "Cooper."

He listened for a moment and then said, "I'm on my way. Don't do anything."

He flipped the phone closed and looked at Jimmy.

"They found Krieger," he said. "He's in the lobby, where that fancy glass ceiling is."

"They arrested him?"

"Not exactly," Cooper said. "Seems he's gone a little nuts and has taken a hostage. You might want to come along."

"Why? I thought—"

"The hostage? It's your friend, the girl—"

"Sabine?" Jimmy asked, getting to his feet.

"No, the young girl," Cooper said, opening the door. "Katherine Landrigan. He's threatening to break her neck."

FORTY-TWO

Lenny Krieger had taken Kat Landrigan hostage right beneath the ceiling called *Fiori di Como,* fashioned by famed glass artist Dale Chihuly.

She'd had the misfortune to be walking through the lobby when Detective Devine and two uniformed Vegas cops spotted Krieger. Devine had shouted at Krieger, who had panicked when he saw the two uniforms drawing their guns. He grabbed the nearest person to use as a hostage—Kat.

By the time Cooper and Jimmy arrived, the lobby had been cleared and there were several more uniforms with guns surrounding Krieger, who was holding Kat's head cradled in his arms, a hold that would make snapping her neck easy.

"Jimmy—" she shouted when she saw him, but Krieger cut her off with a slight yank on her neck that brought her feet off the ground.

"Lenny, take it easy!" Cooper called out. "Don't hurt her."

"I'll break her neck, man!" Krieger screamed. "I swear."

His eyes were wild; the veins in his neck and arms were swollen. In fact, in his tight T-shirt he looked as if every muscle in his torso was going to explode.

"What happened?" Cooper demanded of Devine.

"What?" Devine said, defensive. "I called out for him to stop and he grabbed the girl."

"Was she with him?" Cooper asked.

"No, she was just passin' by."

"Did you tell him he was under arrest for murder?" Cooper asked.

Devine hesitated, then said, "I might have."

Cooper looked at Jimmy. "I don't know exactly what sets off 'roid rage, but that might have spooked him."

"Ya think?" Jimmy asked. "You've got to make him let her go."

"I wanna get out of here!" Krieger shouted.

"Put your gun away," Cooper said to Devine.

"What?"

"Everybody put your guns away," Cooper said, this time to all the cops. His voice echoed in the otherwise empty lobby.

Slowly, each of the cops obeyed and lowered his weapon. Some of the cops had been one false move on Krieger's part away from pulling the trigger.

"Lenny," Cooper said, "I want to talk to you, that's all."

"You wanna arrest me!" Krieger shouted. "I'm gettin' out of here and I'm takin' this girl with me."

Kat's eyes were as wide and crazy as Krieger's, but with fear. He kept picking her up off the ground and setting her down again, alternately choking her, then letting her breathe. Her face was mottled; her nostrils flared when she tried to take in air.

"Lenny," Cooper said calmly. "Let the girl go. We can talk."

"I'm walkin' outta here!"

"No, you're not," Cooper said. "No way."

Jimmy grabbed Cooper's arm. "He'll snap her neck."

"Shut up!" he hissed.

Jimmy let go. His heart was racing, but he had to let the man do his job.

"I can't let you walk, Lenny," Cooper said, "and even if I did, there are more cops outside."

"I'll kill her! I swear I will!"

"Then all these cops will draw their weapons and kill you. Is that what you want?"

Krieger had sweat running down into his eyes. He tried to blink it away, rather than release his hold on Kat. It just made him look even more crazed.

"You've got to let her go, man," Cooper said. "It's the only way you get out of this alive."

"You'll put me in jail."

"Maybe," Cooper said, "maybe not. That's not up to any of us here. That'll be up to a judge and a jury. You get yourself a lawyer and take your chances—but you live."

Jimmy thought Lenny Krieger was actually considering it.

"Come on, Lenny," Cooper said. "Calm down and think, man."

The black detective never raised his voice. Even Jimmy found it strangely soothing.

"I can't—I can't think— Don't rush me—"

"Nobody's rushing you," Cooper said. "Take your time. If you take your time, you'll make the right decision."

Jimmy looked around at the cops. If anyone was going to make a wrong move, he thought it would be Devine. He decided to keep his eyes on the detective, and if he looked like he was going to do something stupid, he'd tackle him. He owed him for a cut chin anyway.

"Nobody's gonna shoot me?" Krieger asked.

"No," Cooper said. "Nobody's going to shoot. Right now all the guns are put away. Just let the girl go, Lenny. You don't want to hurt her."

"I didn't . . ." Krieger said, releasing his hold on Kat's neck.

She immediately sank to the floor, as if her legs wouldn't hold her. "I didn't kill—"

There was immediate movement. Jimmy ran forward and grabbed Kat, pulled her out of the way, just as the uniformed cops closed on Krieger and took him to the floor, cutting off what he was trying to say. They got him on his stomach, pulled his arms behind him roughly, and cuffed him.

"Jimmy . . ." Kat gasped, as he held her tightly. "Jimmy . . ."

"Take it easy with him!" Cooper shouted to the cops. "Damn it, easy!"

Jimmy looked up just as Cooper reached them.

"Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Jimmy said. "You're pretty good at that."

"I used to be a hostage negotiator," Cooper said. "I'm better at that than I am at being a detective. Doped-up bastard. He's obviously insane. I think we got our killer."

But Jimmy wasn't completely sure. Something just wasn't right—call it a poker sixth sense, intuition, or maybe just a gambler's hunch. Then again, why should he overthink it? Right now he was going to have to focus on reality—that reality being the WPT final table. Life-changing money was at stake. He didn't want to blow his chance.

FORTY-THREE

The Final Table . . .

The final table was under way. The gallery was full of spectators, both fans and professionals. The WPT desk was set up with Mike Sexton and Vince Van Patten seated to observe and comment on the action.

Starting from the left of the dealer, the players were Antonio Esfandiari; the HollywoodPoker.com amateur Jason Read; Scooter Thompson and his dummy, Skippy; Gus Hansen; Mike "the Grinder" Mizrachi; and Jimmy Spain in seat six.

Leonard Krieger had been taken away, arrested and charged with four counts of murder. Cooper was satisfied that he had the killer in custody. Jimmy was persuaded enough, and he finally called the room where Belton and Flanagan were still being guarded and gave them their release. Go back to their own rooms, come watch the game, leave town—whatever they wanted to do. He was surprised to see them in the gallery. He'd thought their first reaction would have been to leave town.

Kat had made a very nice recovery from her scare and was also in the gallery, ready to cheer Jimmy on. And to his surprise, Vic was there as well. He assumed Margaret was continuing her assault on the slots.

Mike Sexton had formally introduced Jimmy to Steve Lips-

comb, the creator and CEO of the WPT, who had thanked him for all his help and assured him that he had, indeed, earned his way into the Bad Boy tournament. Everything was coming out just perfect or so it seemed.

Now all Jimmy had to do was concentrate on playing the final table—so what was nagging at him? There was something still rattling around in the back of his mind that he could not isolate or put to rest. It was robbing him of giving the game 100 percent.

Nevertheless, the game was about to get started. The cards were being smoothly shuffled, destiny in the hands of the dealer.

The chip leader at this point was Michael "the Grinder" Mizrachi with 1.8 million dollars. The short stack was the amateur online player Jason Read, only twenty-two and decked out with HollywoodPoker apparel to the max. Seated fifteen feet behind him in the first row was movie star James Woods, also decked out in a matching HollywoodPoker.com outfit, rooting for him.

The kid looked nervous, as well he should be. He only had three hundred thousand in chips. He would have to play fast.

Jimmy was second short stack with about six hundred and fifty thousand. Blinds were five and ten thousand, at this point, with three-thousand-dollar antes.

The winner was going to take home 1.8 million dollars and become a bona fide poker superstar. This was Jimmy's opportunity of a lifetime.

What a final table this was. The flashy WPT light show went off. Twelve cameras spinning in all directions went to work. The packed crowd erupted in applause, and the first hand was in the air. Gus Hansen was the small blind, and the Grinder the big blind. So action right off the bat would be on Jimmy. He

squeezed his cards and looked down at them one at a time. First a four of hearts, then a four of clubs. Lo and behold, a low-wired pair in early position. Six-handed game. Did he want to take a shot? No, patience, he thought. Don't try to be a hero. Then quickly mucked it.

Next was Antonio Esfandiari. He went out. Now on to Mr. HollywoodPoker, Jason Reed. A pair of tens—solid starting hand. The online kid popped it up a bit like he should, making it forty thousand to go. Scooter and Skippy got out of the way, and Gus wanted no part of it. The last one to beat was the Grinder, who caught Big Slick—ace, king—and quickly came over the top an additional raise of one hundred thousand. The crowd went crazy, especially after the kid reluctantly pushed in his last one hundred and sixty grand.

The Grinder quickly called, and both players turned up their hands. James Woods let out the biggest scream when the flop turned up king, six, deuce. Grinder had flopped kings. The last two cards didn't help the kid, and just like that on the very first hand they were down to five players. The kid picked up ninety-nine-thousand dollars and got to chat on camera with beautiful Courtney Freel.

Jimmy Spain had just gone up to at least fifth place prize money. That number was one hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars! He smiled as he thought to himself he had come a long way since practicing his shuffle rack in his prison cell.

The game continued for the next hour with nothing much happening. Jimmy managed to win a couple of small pots and was hanging in there. These guys were the biggest names in the game, and one thing you could tell was they had respect for Jimmy. They marked him as solid, tight. And unless they were strong, didn't want to mess with him. Except one man, Gus

Hansen. That's right, the maniac of poker, thought to play with almost anything and win with it, was up to his old tricks, stealing pots and busting players. He played with reckless abandon, and you couldn't put him on a hand. He was the chip leader now and taking questionable pots from Jimmy and the whole table. Jimmy's strategy was simply to survive. Wait for Gus to get out of line, trap, then punish. Revenge would be sweet. After all, one good double up and he'd be in serious contention to become WPT's newest millionaire.

And then it happened. With blinds of ten and twenty thousand and Jimmy in the big blind, Antonio and Scooter got out, and now Gus, with the button in front of him, raised it up, making it a hundred thousand dollars to go. The Grinder got out, and Jimmy stared down at the mother of all poker hands, two aces. Dream time. Jimmy decided to slow play them, disguise his strength, and, after some skillful acting, finally made a reluctant call.

Flop came up queen, five, four, different suits, and Jimmy quickly checked, knowing that no matter what Gus had, he would bet. He did. The poker bully bet two hundred thousand to go. Jimmy had him slow-played perfectly, liked his overpair, and now wanted to get paid off, going over the top, going all in for his additional four hundred thousand. The great Gus Hansen deliberated, thought and thought, finally shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I guess I call."

He turned up queen, six of hearts, and Gus knew he was in trouble. On the turn there was a deuce and on the river Gus spiked a three, giving him the winning straight. The crowd went crazy. Jimmy Spain was numb. What immediately flashed was the pain he felt and then, just like that, he imagined the pain and horror that poor online player must have felt when he hit

the water after being stabbed and thrown from thirty stories up. Jimmy thought they might be similar. The rest was a blur. Shaking hands all around, the talk with Courtney, the crowd congratulating him. He got out of there fast.

Jimmy accepted the handshakes from the other players and hurried to the sidelines. He grabbed Vic and pulled him away from the others.

"Aw, too bad you didn't win, man," Vic said, "but how'd you do moneywise?"

"A hundred and sixty-five thou, I think," Jimmy said. "Listen—"

"You pissed you came in fifth?"

"No, I'm not pissed, Vic," Jimmy said. "I got my money in with the best. That's poker luck. Something was bothering me the whole time we were playing, though, and now I know what it was."

"What?"

"The arrogance."

"What?"

"Remember the profile? Big, powerful, arrogant? Well, the first two fit Lenny Krieger, but not the third. There's no arrogance in him—he's too filled with self-doubt."

"So you're sayin' the cops got the wrong man? Jimmy, he was gonna break your girl's neck."

"But when he went down," Jimmy said, "he was saying he didn't kill them. The cops cut him off."

"Jimmy, they all say they're innocent. Besides, if he didn't do it, who did?"

"Francisco."

"The wheelchair guy again? I thought you were satisfied that even if he was faking, he didn't kill anybody?"

"Not anymore."

"Why?"

"Because I remember now what's been bothering me," Jimmy said. "The last time I saw him he didn't tell me to stop playing detective, he said that my *policeman friend* and I should stop."

"So?"

"So I didn't know what he meant. I thought he meant Cooper, but that didn't make any sense. He meant you."

"Me? How would he know I was a policeman?"

"He'd know if he went through your pockets after he hit you." Then Jimmy remembered something. "Crap, that was after he mentioned my police friend to me." Jimmy thought a minute. "He must have done some nosing around the Bellagio—or had someone do it for him—found out I had someone from the job helping me, but didn't know who you were until later."

Vic thought a moment, then his eyes widened and he said, "My wallet was on the floor next to me when I came to."

"And your badge holder?"

"Same thing. Son of a bitch. He went through my pockets, saw that I was a cop, and that's why he didn't kill me, too."

"Right."

"He did it," Vic said. "The guy in the wheelchair did it—and he was arrogant enough to make that comment to you."

"It makes me sick, but we've got to prove it. God knows why the hell he did it, but we've got to figure that out, too."

"Give it to Cooper, Jimmy," Vic said. "Let him prove it."

"Cooper has his man," Jimmy said. "He's satisfied. No, we have to do this, you and me."

"Me?"

"You've come this far with me."

Vic thought a moment, then said, "Okay, okay, but . . . how?"

"We've got to figure out a way, and we have to do it tonight."

Jimmy turned in time to catch Kat, who leaped into his arms. Waiting behind her to congratulate him, as well, was Sabine and with her—to his surprise—Dallas Jack.

FORTY-FOUR

When Jimmy entered the Mandalay Sports Book, Francisco was right where he knew he'd be, surrounded by his cronies. They all had their eyes on one of the screens, where a stretch duel was being run at Los Alamitos between two horses. When they crossed the finish line, one a nose ahead of the other, it was clear Francisco was the loser.

Jimmy was able to see the man's face as the horses crossed the finish line. Just for the moment there was a look of pure anguish, and Jimmy knew that what he and Vic had posited as a possible explanation was correct. Francisco was on a terrible losing streak, the kind that squeezed the breath out of a man with every loss, the kind that seemed to last forever.

At that moment Francisco saw Jimmy and suddenly the Great Francisco was back.

"Ah, Jimmy, my friend," he said expansively. "I heard you came in fifth. Congratulations. Not a bad outcome for being away so long."

"Thanks, Francisco," Jimmy said, "but I should have won that tournament. I blame you that I didn't."

"Me?" Francisco said, his eyes wide. "But why? What did the Great Francisco do to deserve such an accusation?"

The Panamanian's entourage turned to look at him and Jimmy curiously.

"Francisco," Jimmy asked, "can we talk somewhere more . . . private?"

"How private?"

"Very." Jimmy was still not 100 percent sure he was right, and if he wasn't, he didn't want anyone else around to see it.

Francisco seemed slightly annoyed, but he could tell by Jimmy's eyes that he was serious. "Of course, Jimmy. Let's go to a private place to talk. I am a little embarrassed, my friend. Usually I have a suite at my disposal but these days—"

"Just how bad a losing streak are you on, Francisco?"

The man closed his mouth and stared at Jimmy, then said, "Oof, you don't want know."

"Come with me," Jimmy said.

Jimmy got behind the wheelchair and started pushing.

Prior to taking the cab to the Mandalay Bay, he had found Mike Sexton and once again put the man's contacts to good use. Armed with a name, he had stopped off to see someone before going to the Sports Book. In his pocket he had a key—a two-thousand-dollar key—that he hoped first he would not have to use, and second would be worth the money.

It was late, close to midnight. The head-to-head finale of the tournament at the Bellagio was still going strong. Here at Mandalay Bay it was quieter than usual, but Jimmy knew someplace that would be even quieter. He followed the signs hanging from the ceiling as he pushed Francisco along.

"What is on your mind, my friend?" Francisco asked. His expression serious, no trace of the Great Francisco there, just Francisco the loser.

"Quite a few things, my friend," Jimmy said. "For one, this whole wheelchair bit. It's a bet, isn't it? Some kind of a pathetic, desperate bet?"

Francisco began to laugh, a sick, demented laugh.

"Ah Jimmy, how could you say that? I am a cripple, my friend. They attacked me with baseball bats. I told you this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Francisco, you told me that," Jimmy said, "but a lot of things don't add up. Your shoes are scuffed, your hands are not as calloused as they should be for someone in a wheelchair, you have empty condom wrappers in your bedroom, and no wheelchair ramps in your building."

"Condoms—I thought someone had been in my apartment," Francisco said. "You are a practicing burglar now, Jimmy?"

"Francisco, a man in your condition—the condition you claim to suffer from—should not be able to have sex. You should be impotent."

Francisco seemed shocked, growing more and more irritated. "Just because I am handicapped doesn't mean I can't enjoy my sex. If that was the case, my friend, I would want to die."

"You've made too many mistakes," Jimmy said. "Whenever this bet is supposed to end, I don't think you would have collected. I'm sure whoever you have this bet with has noticed a lot of what I noticed. How many years has it been?"

"You are talking crazy, my friend. Why are you doing this to me?"

"You still won't admit it?"

"Admit what? This has gone far enough." Francisco tried to stop the wheels with his hands, but Jimmy kept pushing.

He pushed Francisco's wheelchair through a door and they were outside, in the pool area. Mandalay Bay had three pools, a small lake, and a waterfall, all on eleven acres. This late at night, there was no one around but the two of them.

"What are you doing?" Francisco asked. "I demand to go back now!"

Jimmy didn't answer. Standing behind Francisco he pulled a roll of duct tape from his pocket and quickly taped Francisco's right arm to the wheelchair.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

With that, another piece of duct tape went over the Panamanian's mouth and wrapped around his head. Francisco started to squirm, but Jimmy was too fast, wrapping his second arm to the chair. Francisco was completely strapped in and screaming muffled obscenities.

Jimmy pushed Francisco to the far end of the nearest pool, where they wouldn't accidentally be seen from inside. Someone might see them from a room above but wouldn't be able to do anything from there.

They arrived at the edge of the pool. The depth number 5 was painted on the side.

Francisco had terror in his eyes.

"Francisco, one last time. Can you walk, yes or no?"

Francisco violently shook his head. You could hear the muffled words coming from under the duct tape.

It sounded to Jimmy like he said, "Of course not, you crazy son of a bitch. I will drown!"

Jimmy stuck a finger in his face. "I know you, Francisco. You can fucking walk. You're the king of the hustle. Just goddamn admit it."

But Francisco just kept shaking his head in complete panic.

Jimmy pushed. Francisco's wheelchair went into the pool and quickly sank to the bottom. Francisco, his hair floating about his head, struggled against the duct tape, but even in the pool the tape held. Jimmy found himself hoping he was right, otherwise he was going to be in a shitload of trouble.

"Come on, come on," he said to himself, "stand up . . ."

Francisco continued to struggle, and then suddenly—just when Jimmy was thinking he might have to jump in after him—Francisco stood up. His head and shoulders broke the surface of the water. Jimmy had made sure to dump him into the five-foot-deep area.

Jimmy shook his head.

"You son of a bitch!" Then he leaned over and ripped the duct tape off Francisco's mouth. Without a beat Francisco exclaimed, "It is a miracle. My legs, they are back. Perhaps the chlorine, my friend, stimulated—"

But Jimmy grabbed him violently by the collar and pulled him close.

"Cut the shit, Francisco. This thing is over. You better start talking or I swear to God I'll fucking drown you myself."

Francisco knew he was in trouble. He nodded in defeat and walked toward the steps, dragging his clunky wheelchair behind him. He was muttering in Spanish, his left leg bleeding from the debacle, but his ex-soccer legs got the job done.

When he got himself and the chair out of the pool, he fell back into the chair, the wheels hitting the ground with a thud. He was safe now—sopping wet and defeated.

"All right," he gasped. "So I can walk."

"How many years has it been?"

"Six," Francisco said.

"And what was the bet for?"

"Seven."

"You bet someone that you could stay in a wheelchair for seven years?"

Francisco stared at Jimmy a few moments, catching his breath before he spoke. His black hair was matted to his head; water dripped from his chin.

"The bet was," he said, "that I could convince people for seven years that I was paralyzed. That did not mean that I could not get up and walk in my own home or have a lady visit me from time to time."

"Still, that's a lot of time to spend in a wheelchair when you don't have to. How much was this bet for?" Jimmy asked.

"A half-million dollars. And now if anybody finds out about this, I will lose this bet," he said angrily.

Jimmy whistled. "A half a mil. That's a good one, all right."

"Not really," Francisco said, "not when you divide half a million by seven years. It is actually a bet I am sorry I made."

"And is there another bet you're not sorry about?" Jimmy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw where you live, Francisco," Jimmy said. "I saw your face when you lost that last race. How long has this losing streak been going on?"

"It is . . . interminable," the man said. "I do not believe I have cashed a significant bet in . . . oh, ten years."

"Ten years? You *are* running bad."

"Yes, it is terrible, my friend," Francisco said, "and now . . ."

"Now, what?"

"I am living where I do because there is no more money coming from my family," Francisco said. "They have cut me off." He tried to bring one hand up, wanting to slam it down on the arm of the chair. But the duct tape still held. "It is not fair!" His eyes blazed. "I only needed a little more time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to wait out the streak," he said. "All losing streaks come to an end—you know that."

"So let me get this straight, Francisco," Jimmy said. "You're running bad, and you can certainly walk—"

Francisco got indignant, totally frustrated. "Of course I can walk. I am the Great Francisco. I am strong and masculine . . . and I can perform sexually." He wagged his index finger at Jimmy. It was an odd gesture with his arms taped down the way they were. "Do not forget that!"

Jimmy felt relieved that he had been right about this part. Now he could go on to the next—and hope that he was wrong.

He stepped around behind Francisco, took out the tape and quickly wound it around and around the man's torso, taping him to the back of the chair.

FORTY-FIVE

"What the hell are you doing now?" Francisco demanded.

"Did you kill Tim Bennett and the other posse members?"

Francisco looked stunned, obviously never expecting the question to come straight at him.

"You are crazy," he said. "Why would I—"

"How'd you like to go back into the pool the way you are now, Francisco? Take another dunk."

"You would not . . ." Francisco said, then stopped and eyed Jimmy intently. "I did not kill anyone. I am a pathetic, gambling hustler, yes, but not a killer. Go ahead—throw me in the water."

"No," Jimmy said, "no, we already did that. I've got something else in mind."

He got behind Francisco's chair and started pushing. Here came the part that cost him two thousand bucks.

"Where are we going now?" Francisco demanded. "Come on, my friend, do not get crazy. Yes, I can walk. Another bet I will not win."

"This is worse, Francisco," Jimmy said. "Murder is worse."

Francisco scoffed. "But I did not— Why would you think—"

"We found cards in your room, Francisco, lots of decks. Funny thing, lots of the paint cards were gone."

"But what are you saying now? Paint cards? I don't know what you are saying."

"And since when were you so fascinated by Pablo Picasso?" Jimmy asked, referring to the art books he'd seen in Francisco's apartment. "Are you starting a library?"

"You are not making sense. Picasso, he is an artist. I appreciate true art."

"You appreciate the Picasso flop, don't you. What was it? Some sick bet you got lucky on? Or was it a sick beat?"

"You are a madman!"

Jimmy continued to push, past the pools now, farther back to where the sign marked SHARK REEF was.

Francisco saw the sign and asked, "W-where are we going, my friend?"

"You'll see."

The Shark Reef was an aquarium, the kind where people could walk through glass tunnels and see the sharks and other fish swim around them. But Jimmy had the key to a door no one but employees normally had access to. A key and a spot . . .

He pushed Francisco behind some tropical trees. Then they reached a closed door that said: DANGER—DO NOT ENTER. Jimmy used the key to unlock it, and he pushed Francisco through.

"This is enough, Jimmy," he said as they went down a tiny, damp, cavelike hall. "Enough is enough."

"Don't make me gag you again. Now, why did you kill those men, Francisco?"

"I did not—"

"Here we are," Jimmy said, and stopped.

It was dark and quiet, except for the sound of trickling water. They were near a pool.

"This is where they feed the sharks, Francisco. They got twenty-foot great whites in there that get pretty hungry." Actu-

ally, Jimmy didn't know that there were no great whites in captivity, but then neither did Francisco.

"Jimmy, why are we here? You know it is against the law to be back here," said Francisco nervously.

"Because," Jimmy said, pushing Francisco to the edge of the water, "my friends here are going to help you tell the truth."

"Your . . . friends?"

"The sharks."

Jimmy pointed to the open end of the pool where three or four white dorsal fins swam ominously, sensing a feeding session.

"You . . . you wouldn't."

Jimmy shoved the chair so that the front wheels were over the edge. He held tightly to the handles.

"Murder, Francisco," he said. "Tell me about murder."

Francisco craned his neck to look back at Jimmy with pleading eyes.

"Jimmy, you would not. Come on, this is madness."

Jimmy pushed a little more, holding the handles tightly and leaning back.

"Come on, Francisco. This chair is getting heavy. Tell me now or you're going in."

The shark fins started to cruise closer, feeling a late-night snack could be in the offing.

"Damn it, Jimmy. I am not a murderer," Francisco said angrily. He began to jerk side to side, back and forth, trying to break the tape that held him.

Splash! Jimmy dropped the wheelchair and the bleeding Francisco into the pool. Francisco quickly began screaming.

"Have you lost your mind? Who is murdering who?"

"Shut up!"

Francisco dangled clumsily with his chair, up to his neck in

deep water. Jimmy continued to grip the handles tightly, the huge shark fins getting closer and closer.

"Jimmy, my God. The sharks are coming. Pull me out now! I insist!"

"Not unless you admit it, you sick degenerate! Why'd you kill them, Francisco? Why'd you murder those kids? Don't make me turn you into chum."

Francisco was in a complete panic.

"Please. I did not. I did not!" He continued to kick and splash, the blood from his knee now gushing. A blue shark zeroed in on him. He had his target and was only seconds away when Francisco screamed out, "Okay, I did it! I murdered them. I am a killer. Now get me out of here."

Jimmy quickly pulled him up. The fin just three feet away from them, brushed against the side wall. Francisco was in complete meltdown. Jimmy spun the chair around and grabbed Francisco by the throat.

"Talk!"

"One million dollars. That was the bet," Francisco said in a deranged way.

"Keep talking." Jimmy cut Francisco loose from the duct tape with a knife. Francisco dropped to the ground, exhausted.

"I thought you said the bet was a half a million," Jimmy said.

"The wheelchair bet was half a million," the man said. "The posse bet, that was a million."

"What'd you do, Francisco?"

The drenched, maniacal man was now gasping. His eyes looked deranged. He looked up.

"The Great Francisco bet a million dollars that no posse member would make it to the final table." Francisco spread his

arms, looking proud of himself. "As you know, I won. The streak is broken."

"That's it? And you expect to collect your money?"

"Not yet, but soon. Dallas Jack always pays his debts," Francisco said.

"You made that bet with Dallas Jack?"

"Of course," Francisco said. "It was he who gave me the idea."

"I see."

"You see, my friend, Jack and I were sitting in the Sports Book one day, lamenting the state of the poker world today, thanks to those Internet idiots. He told me his Web site, once as popular as even Doyle Brunson's, was suffering because of them. He told me he thought they were going to push old-timers like him and me out. That was when I got the idea for the bet. With this Bellagio tournament coming up I told Dallas Jack I thought he had a better chance of getting to the final table than any of those *pendejos* did. My friend Jack told me his day had passed and that the younger men would probably prevail, both at the tournament and Web site." Francisco shook his head. "I did not like seeing my friend in such a state."

"And the bet?"

"I told him I would bet him one million dollars that none of the posse members would make it to the final table. And more, I bet him a million dollars more that their Web site would be dead within a year."

"Two million dollars total?"

"Yes. I have already earned half. And a year from now, I will have earned the other half, and the Great Francisco will be back."

Jimmy stared at the man incredulously.

"You killed four men because of a bet?" he asked.

"It was not only to win," Francisco explained. "They were

ruining the game—they were driving my friend Dallas Jack away from the game. I did it for him and for all the other players"—he looked at Jimmy in a sick yet compassionate way—"like you, my friend."

"Not for me," Jimmy said. "You didn't do this for me. And you didn't do it for Jack. You're taking his two million dollars."

Francisco waved a hand. "Ah, that is only money," he said. "It was a bet between friends. He will pay happily."

"Will he?" Jimmy asked. "When he learns what you've done to win?"

"I explained that to you," Francisco said. "I will explain it to him. He will understand. After all, a bet is a bet." He said it as if it all made perfect sense.

Jimmy studied his old friend's face. Was he that far gone? Had he lost his grip on reality so totally that he could justify four murders?

"Francisco," Jimmy said, "you did a bad thing."

"Oh no, Jimmy," Francisco said. "It is a good thing for everyone."

"Maybe you," Jimmy said. "You were going to get two million dollars."

"The losing streak is over!" Francisco announced. "That is what is important. I tell you"—he lowered his voice, as if they were coconspirators now—"I am even going to win my weight bet with Dallas Jack."

"And the wheelchair bet? Was that with Jack, too?"

"No," Francisco said, "that was with someone else, but it is not important. What is important is that you understand—"

At that point Detective Cooper, Vic Porcelli, and three cops entered the pool area unobserved by Francisco. They hung back, listening.

"Francisco," Jimmy said, "you killed those men. You have to pay."

"Pay?" Francisco's voice rose. "Pay? I have *been* paying for years! Now it is time for Francisco to *be* paid!" He pounded his chest. "I earned the money!"

"By killing people?"

"And by doing it brilliantly. The police would never have caught me. It is only you, my equally brilliant friend, who has figured it out. But you are my friend, no? You would not turn on me. You *could* not."

"Cuff him," Cooper said then, "and take him in."

"This is not right," Francisco said, as the uniformed cops led him away.

"Wait a minute," Jimmy called.

The two policemen turned, Francisco with them, to face Jimmy.

"What about the cards, Francisco? The Picasso flop? What was that about?"

"Picasso is my favorite painter," Francisco said. "Every painting of his was a work of art." He shrugged. "My murders? Also works of art."

Francisco looked at the black detective and shrugged again.

"Take him away," Cooper said in disgust.

As they walked Francisco down the hall he shouted over his shoulder, "Jimmy, my friend, I will bet you a million dollars I am not convicted!"

FORTY-SIX

Tomorrow, when they heard what the murders were about the whole poker world would go into shock. But in a bizarre way they would understand it. Out here, it was win at all costs. In some sick way, the hustlers, gamblers, the action guys actually admired it. In poker it was kill or be killed. This just took it to a different level.

Cooper had told Jimmy there was no complicity on the part of Dallas Jack. Jimmy was glad. He would have hated to be the one to tell Sabine that Jack was being arrested and that he had had something to do with it. Cooper also told him the murder charges against Lenny Krieger would be dropped. He'd be hit with lesser charges, but they'd try to get him some help for his steroid problems.

When Jimmy came back through the lobby at Bellagio nothing seemed to have changed. It still felt as if he had entered a giant pinball machine. People scurried about, totally oblivious to what he had been through. He noticed a commotion as he walked past the lobby bar. There was a pack of poker players and fans celebrating with their new WPT champion, Scooter and his dummy, Skippy. He had upset Gus Hansen to take the title. This was good for the game. This colorful duo had already established their groupies. At least five people were hanging around, holding dummies in their laps. The power of television.

He saw Kat coming toward him with a worried look on her face.

"Dude," she said, "I've been lookin' everywhere for you. What's goin' on?"

"Nothing, Kat," he answered. "It's all over." Quickly he told her that Francisco was the murderer and that he was in police custody. He didn't tell her about almost drowning the man twice to get him to confess. He found that he wasn't particularly pleased with or proud of those actions.

"Wow," she said, "I'm glad that's over."

"Yep," Jimmy said, "no more murders."

"You heard the puppet guy won?"

"Dummy."

"What?"

"He's a dummy."

"Well, maybe he is, but he won."

"No, I mean the puppet—" He stopped short. "Never mind. I think it's time for us to check out and get back home."

"Dude," she said, "we gotta celebrate. We both made some money— You made a bundle! Can't we stay one more day? It is my first time in Vegas, ya know."

She had done really well for her first time in with the big dogs.

"Okay," he said, "one more day, and then we head home."

"Okay, dude, but remember one thing," she said.

"What's that?"

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."

He hated that slogan.

♥

Jimmy walked briskly through the casino, trying to avoid being noticed. He wanted nothing more than to go to his room.

Exhausted, yet still wired, Jimmy knew it was finally over. He knew he should be proud: he had come out here and beat out more than three hundred players to make a true statement on the international poker circuit. He helped Kat play her best game yet. He even got to solve a few murders. Murders that were unsolvable unless you had the mind of a great poker player. Maybe that's what was bugging him. He was good, possibly too good at being a detective. His dad would have been proud, and that started to scare him. God forbid that this was really his destiny. Talent should not be thrown away like that, and he knew it. He was in trouble. When was he going to get the chance to check raise Gus Hansen again? Who was going to bluff Mike "the Grinder" Mizrachi for all the chips and then casually flash the audience as they screamed and hollered? No, poker was his life now, and it was his turn to shine. With the WPT tour giving millions away each year, this would be a tough lay down. Because if you really thought about it, there were only two words that meant something in the world of poker—"all in."

AUTHORS' NOTE

We feel it's important to point out that the Mandalay Bay and Bellagio are jewels of the Vegas Strip and that none of the incidents described in the book have ever taken place there. The Five Diamond tournament is an actual WPT event held at the Bellagio. There is a Shark Reef display at the Mandalay Bay, but we doubt anyone in a wheelchair has ever drowned there.

Vince Van Patten
Robert J. Randisi

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—RJR

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